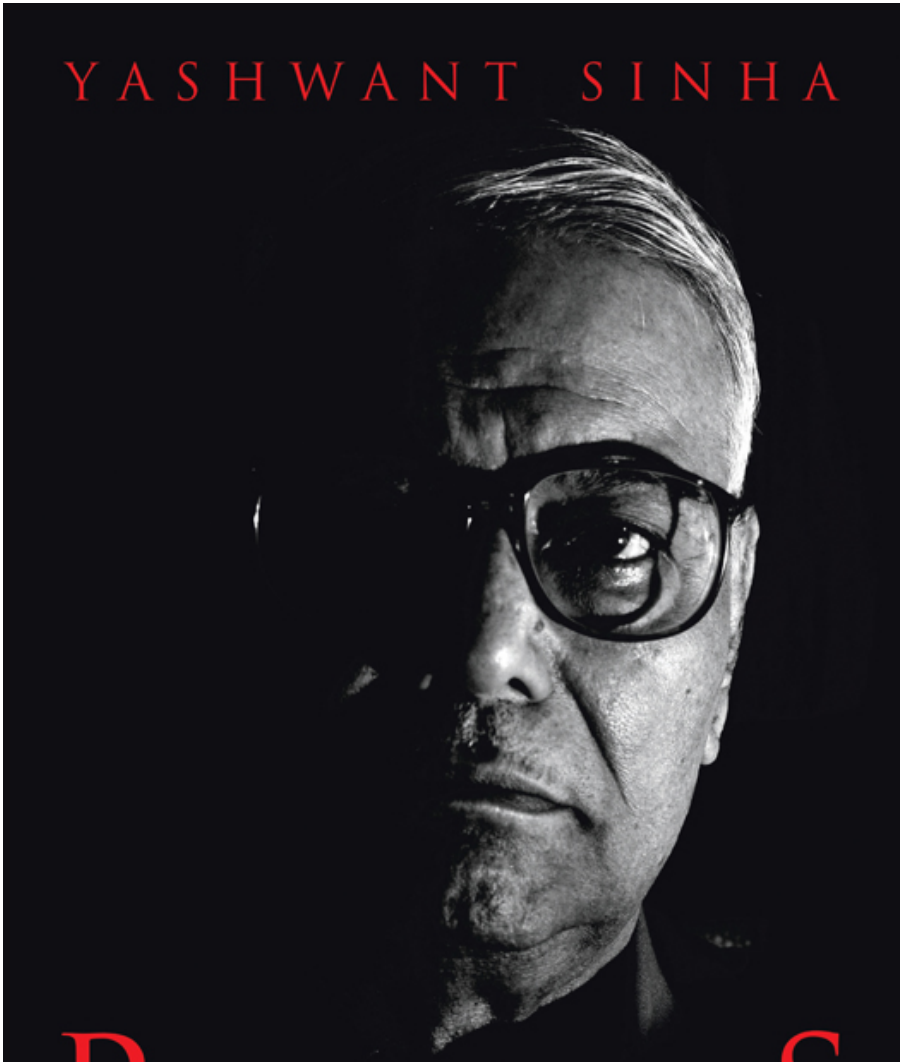
YASHWANT SINHA



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Yashwant Sinha

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I really had no desire or plan to write an autobiography. Some time ago, however, I was approached by Rajiv Beri of Bloomsbury to take up the task. I was reluctant at first, but then we started discussing some of the events in my life over a cup of tea, its twists and turns and ups and downs. Rajiv Beri felt that they were interesting enough to merit a book. So, it was agreed that I would undertake the task of writing my autobiography, and soon the necessary arrangements were put in place by Bloomsbury. Thus began yet another journey, which also had its twists and turns like much of my life. Slowly but surely the book started to take shape and here it is.

My thanks, therefore, are due, first of all, to Rajiv Beri and his distinguished colleague Praveen Tiwari of Bloomsbury for planting the seed of this idea, and also for holding my hand throughout this exercise. I am also grateful to them for providing the necessary secretarial assistance through Satya Misra without whom this book may not have seen the light of day. The editor of the book, Preeti Singh, deserves my very special thanks for working painstakingly on the manuscript, giving me valuable advice, doing research on critical issues, especially where my memory failed me, and encouraging me to include incidents and events from my life that came up during our discussions.

And last but not the least is the contribution of my wife, Nilima, an author herself and, in this case, almost the co-author of the book, its in-house editor, a critical but willing adviser and an equal partner in crime.

My children Sharmila, Jayant and Sumant and their respective spouses Ashok, Punita and Vaishali have been forthcoming with their advice and suggestions whenever we approached them for their counsel or information on specific issues or incidents. Our grandchildren Rishabh, Devansh, Tarushi, Aashir and Sidhhant have all been a great help with their comments, criticism, linguistic advice and plenty of encouragement whenever needed. My grateful thanks to all of them. I hope my life's tale will be of interest to them.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

It was a cold evening in faraway Narsinghpur, a district town in Madhya Pradesh. I shivered as I sat on a wooden 'chowki' under the open sky. As the sun set, and the evening progressed, the weather turned colder. I pulled the blanket tighter around me.

The evening soon turned into night and the cold intensified further. I covered myself with yet another blanket. Hunger began to gnaw at my stomach and I looked up, my eyes pleading for something to eat. I must have looked no different from one of the beggars that one sees on the streets of India, as someone put a roti with some vegetables on it in my outstretched hand.

Here was a former collector, sitting on dharna in front of the present collector's office with a crowd of farmers. A former finance minister was away from Delhi for the first time in two decades on Budget day. What a strange sight it must have been in Narsinghpur that day—on the first of February 2018.

I wondered – what would life have been like for me had I stayed back in Delhi that day and not come to Narsinghpur?

Earlier in the day, the finance minister had presented the annual Union Budget to Parliament. It was after many long years that I was absent from the national capital on this important occasion. I knew well that the media sought me out at least on this day, if no other, as they were interested in my views on the Budget—ever since I had presented the interim Budget in 1991. After 2004, it had almost become a ritual for me to write a piece for some newspaper or the other and share my comments with a few TV channels.

Today was different. I was not in Delhi but in distant Narsinghpur, with the farmers of the area who had taken issue with the government of the state. We had gone in a procession to the collector's office to seek solutions to their problems and had been stopped at the gate. In protest, we had decided to sit on dharna at the same spot. At Budget time, therefore, I was worlds away from all the activity in Delhi.

But did the Budget even matter to anyone in Narsinghpur? The farmers who had assembled there were certainly not interested, as they had finally stopped believing in the promises made by politicians. Why? I asked myself. It led to many

other questions in my mind as I sat in that far-off place.

Is this what you had bargained for, Yashwant Sinha? My mind went all the way back – eight decades…to the beginning...

PART I

ROOTS

CHAPTER 1

CAREFREE EARLY DAYS

The date and year of my birth is lost in the labyrinth of time. In the Thirties of the last century, when I was born, registering a birth was not a customary practice and parents were often vague about the dates of their children's births. For official purposes, of course, the date entered in the school certificate was considered final. My eldest brother, Tuntun Bhaiya, who had taken me to school for admission in 1944, had entered it as 6 November 1937.

My real age may well have been slightly higher (nobody seemed to remember by how much) but it was quite normal in those days to declare a child's age as less than what it really was. Family planning was unheard of and the birth of a child was considered purely as the will of God. Child mortality was rampant, so it was not unusual for couples to have many children. My parents were blessed with eleven children—seven sons and four daughters. Fortunately, since all of us survived, we were a large family. I was the lucky ninth child ('lucky' because the number is supposed to be auspicious in Hindu astrology), born after six brothers and two sisters, and followed by two younger sisters. I am grateful my parents did not practice family planning, otherwise I never would have seen the light of day.

As the ninth-born, I believe my birth was an unremarkable event, prompting neither celebration nor exhilaration. In fact, I was probably an 'extra' my family could have done without.

My parents called me Mukund – one of the names for Lord Vishnu – a perfectly decent name that could easily have been my official moniker. However, since my father liked to name his sons after famous warriors, he decided to give my name as Yashwant Sinha in the school register, after the famed Rajput warrior Jaswant Singh. It seems we did not have a fixed family name. My grandfather was Gopal Narayan, while my father adopted Saran as his family name.

My elder brothers decided to adopt the surname 'Sinha' and I followed suit. Since then Sinha has become our family name. It was also quite common to have both a pet name and a formal one. My brothers were Tuntun (Ram Pratap Sinha),

Mutun (Bijay Narain Sinha), Lutur (Amar Sinha), Geeta (Samar Sinha), Meena (Ajit Sinha), and Govind (Ranjit Sinha). My eldest sister Prema was called Babuni. The other three mercifully had only one name each, Madhuri, Saroj and Manju. For me, Yashwant, meaning the 'one who has achieved glory', seemed to have been good enough.

My early childhood was largely uneventful, though history was being made in India and around the world. The latter was caught in the throes of the Second World War – and the country was busy with its struggle for freedom. With no school to attend and no homework to struggle with until I turned seven, I didn't have a care in the world. I spent most of my days playing on the streets outside, taking up challenging games and getting into what adults would term mischief.

Often, these activities included dangerous pranks and stunts like balancing with a leg each on the two parallel walls behind our house. There was always the risk of falling between the two and getting hurt, which I often did, followed by stern admonitions. The scars on my chin are not just a reminder of those carefree days but also badges of honour from repeating the mischief again and again, till I learnt to balance myself.

Other escapades included hitching a ride on the footboard of a horse-drawn phaeton, which was at the back of the carriage, hidden from the driver's view. There were quite a few of them those days and the trick was to be quick enough to evade the reach of the driver's long whip and scurry away to safety, with only a tongue lashing to follow.

This habit of taking calculated risks survives till date.

Like most little boys in those days, I loved to fly kites and run after those whose strings had been cut. To catch a loose kite was pure bliss; to catch one with a long string attached to it was heaven itself – the theme of many a childhood dream. I used to keenly watch the tangle of dancing kites in the sky, running after the 'hacked' ones along with a horde of boys who would be watching these kite fights equally keenly. Success in catching a loose kite depended on how fast you could run and how high you could jump.

The struggle for 'looting' the one adrift was quite fierce, and success that much sweeter if you could beat the rest of the kite chasers. Being tall and athletic, I was often more successful than the others. I was also fond of playing with marbles, though I was never the best and envied the boys who could hit those colourful

spheres from a longer distance in a game where success was measured by the number of marbles you could win from others.

When it came to mischief, my creativity and skill knew no bounds, often drawing the ire of strangers and family members alike. One afternoon I was caught red-handed by the government inspector, as I twisted the public water tap on and off. He scolded me and angrily twisted my ear, news of which interrupted my father's afternoon siesta. I vividly remember him striding out of the house – clad only in a pair of shorts and a vest – and, without a second thought, slapping the poor unsuspecting inspector hard on the cheek.

All hell broke loose. The man accused my father of obstructing a public servant from performing his official duty – a serious charge that could have spelt real trouble for my father. The matter was only settled when neighbours intervened and asked for the inspector's forgiveness.

Fed up with my pranks, my parents finally decided to send me to a school across the street from our house. Most schools those days followed the calendar year and I was admitted to class four, the starting class in a high school, in July 1944, when half the term was already over. I clearly remember my first day in school when I was asked to sit next to a boy, Awadhesh, who helped me deal with all the teasing and later became a close friend. I hated school and found the lessons tough and difficult to understand. In fact, I believe I was promoted to the next class not because of my performance but because I belonged to a neighbourhood family.

My luck must have held even in class five because, despite having scored a set of grand zeroes in arithmetic in the two semester examinations, and the final—spread over the entire year—I was promoted to class six. Perhaps it was this experience that made me decide to give up mathematics at the first chance I got.

Little did I know that mathematics would not give up on me.

My mother, though illiterate herself, was a hard taskmaster when it came to her sons' education. Legend has it that when my second oldest brother, Bijay, tried to avoid studying she hit him so hard that the blow broke his nose. It was fair warning for the rest of us. My two elder sisters never received any formal education, as sending girls to school was quite uncommon then. However, by the time my two younger sisters grew up, things had changed, and they were fortunate enough to receive a school and college education.

While I was busy with my pranks, keeping my parents on their toes and struggling

at school, the world around us was churning and changing. One of my earliest childhood memories is of a visit by my maternal uncle Jaleshwar Prasad, a lawyer and freedom fighter. He arrived one afternoon when my mother was sitting in the courtyard after finishing her daily chores and I was playing nearby, and announced in a solemn voice, 'The war has started!' His tone was so grave and sombre that this episode has stuck in my memory, even though I could not comprehend the full import of his words at that time.

The year was 1939, and my uncle had just told us that the Second World War had broken out.

Another vivid memory is from 1942, when our freedom struggle was at its peak with the Quit India movement. The area where we lived was a mohalla (community neighbourhood), divided into two parts: old and new, with the newer part having come up after the devastating earthquake of 1934. We did not have a house of our own as our father had never built one. We generally lived in rented accommodation in either old or new Kadamkuan, which is where the elite of the town—lawyers, doctors and other professionals—lived in large, spacious houses. Our house was situated on a street off the main road on which the landmark Hindi Sahitya Sammelan building still stands today. The street acquired more fame later as the famous Bollywood actor, and my good friend, Shatrughan Sinha, was also raised here.

During the freedom struggle, there were frequent protests and processions in the old Kadamkuan, considered the intellectual capital of Patna. As a child, I often used to join these processions. It was usually fun but what happened one day was not funny at all. Some protestors felled a tree and deliberately placed it at the junction of our street and the main road to obstruct traffic, not far from where we lived. A curfew had been imposed and British troops (or Tommies, as they were called) were out patrolling the streets. My father had anticipated the fallout of that felled tree and its potential to cause trouble. The Tommies were known to be ruthless and would go to any extent in their cruelty, even against the innocent. The women were particularly vulnerable.

My father and elder brothers hastily prepared a contingency plan, where my mother and the younger children were sent up to the first-floor room and ordered into complete silence. The men took up positions on the ground floor with whatever 'weapons' they could find like *dandas* (thick wooden sticks), kitchen knives, screwdrivers etc., while we crouched on the floor. Up to my usual tricks, I was out on the roof peeping from a gap in the parapet when I saw a troop of Tommies pouring out of a truck that had screeched to a halt near the felled tree.

I still remember their white faces and khaki uniforms and how they moved swiftly, menacingly. As a child, I could not fully comprehend the situation, but I

can still taste the fear from years ago, as they tramped into some houses near the T-junction, barking orders, hurling insults and abuses at residents, forcing them to clear the road before driving away. Our entire household breathed a collective sigh of relief as a major crisis was averted.

I also remember a similar dread filling the air when large-scale communal riots broke out just before India's independence. Cries of 'Bajrang Bali Ki Jai' and 'Allah Hu Akbar' used to rent the air at night, though our mohalla remained largely insulated from the unfortunate violence that marred the birth of the two nations of India and Pakistan.

Unfortunately, such violence continues to trouble us even today. I have spent my years struggling against such disturbances, both as an administrator and as a politician.

Mai and Babuji

My father, Bipin Bihari Saran, was born in January 1893. He was the youngest of four brothers and one sister. My grandfather was a pleader in the Arrah Courts in the Shahabad district of Bihar. He had a flourishing practice of around ₹2000 per month that enabled him to live like a prince, as well as acquire a sizeable zamindari and large tracts of agricultural land. A zamindari meant that he bought villages with the right to collect rent from the tenants, under the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwallis.

They say that my grandfather was so fair that the British soldiers who had come to fight the army of Babu Kunwar Singh in the First War of Independence, not far from our village, mistook him for an Anglo-Indian child and almost carried him away with them. It was only after much pleading and entreaties made by my great-grandfather that he was returned.

We hail from a village called Pandepatti in the Buxar sub-division, (now a district) of the erstwhile Shahabad district in Bihar. Before moving to Pandepatti just before 1857, the family lived in village Murar within the same sub-division. We belonged to the clan of Bakshis of Murar, a major branch of the Kayastha community in Bihar, made famous by Dr. Sachidananda Sinha. Dr. Sinha was the creator of modern Bihar and the interim president of the Constituent Assembly of

India, where another Kayastha from Bihar, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, succeeded him.

I am not aware of the reasons why the family left Murar to settle in Pandepatti, but our links with Murar continued for a long time. I remember the family 'purohit' (priest) coming from Murar to perform the marriage ceremonies of my elder brothers and sisters. Over time, our links with both Murar and Pandepatti weakened, as the family moved to different corners of the state and beyond.

My father, whom we called Babuji, was sent to a boarding school in Allahabad as a boy. He was a keen football player and represented his school team in many matches. My paternal grandfather had big plans for his youngest son, but they all came to naught when he succumbed to cancer. It must have been a tremendous setback for the family. Babuji was called back from Allahabad and admitted to the Zila School in Buxar. Like many other Kayastha families, good education and a professional career was our forte. My eldest uncle joined the Bihar Civil service and the second one went on to become a district judge. Babuji's third brother was assigned the task of managing the zamindari after my grandfather's death.

Babuji obtained his bachelor's degree from Patna College. Continuing his sporting activities there, he became the captain of both the football and hockey teams and represented his college in cricket as well. I would listen to him with great interest about his exploits as a player and about the innumerable fights that would break out on the playing field. You had to be tough to survive in a football team. I was told that he stood like a rock, playing as a full back in both the hockey and football teams. They also played matches with the British troops who were stationed in the Cantonment area in Dinapore (as it was called then), near Patna.

Such matches, quite obviously, often acquired racial overtones. The British were unusually aggressive. Once, during a match being played at the Patna College ground, an aggressive British centre forward hit my father's hockey stick so hard it fell from his hands. The crowd watching the match was stunned. My father, the captain of the team, felt deeply humiliated and decided not to take the insult lightly. The next time the English centre forward advanced towards him, my father hit him so hard with his hockey stick that both the player and his hockey stick came crashing to the ground. A roar of applause went up from the crowd. National honour stood fully restored.

Patna College is situated in the Muradpur area of the city, which is now called Ashok Rajpath. Babuji's sporting fame reached the streets of Muradpur, where even children would recognise him. Not only was this a matter of immense pride for him but it also gave him an over-sized ego. After his BA, he joined the MA course, only to leave it soon after because his professor did not specially look at him while teaching! Such was his arrogance. He left Patna College and joined Law College instead.

The English principal of Patna College, quite impressed by my father, wanted him to join the Bihar Civil Service. He gave him a letter of recommendation addressed to a senior British officer. On his way to meet the British officer, my father stopped by to meet his brother who was in the judicial service. Jealousy and ill-will seized my uncle. In an attempt to thwart my father's chances, my uncle told him that the British could not be trusted. He advised him to open the envelope and read the contents of the letter before submitting it.

The letter was full of praise for my father. After speaking about his qualities and achievements, the principal used a phrase that is still firmly etched in my memory: 'he is more of a man than many.' However, the damage had already been done; my father could not take an opened envelope to the officer concerned. In a fit of anger, Babuji tore up the letter and flung it to the ground, telling his brother that he had succeeded in his malicious intent.

Perhaps it was this experience that prompted him to encourage his sons to join government service.

After finishing his legal studies, my father joined Patna High Court as an advocate. I understand that he established a good practice, enabling the family to live comfortably despite its growing size.

My mother, whom we called 'Mai', was Babuji's second wife, the first having died during child birth a year or so after marriage. However, despite this tragedy and Babuji's second marriage, we maintained a close relationship with the family of our 'pahli mai' (first mother). My mother was the eldest daughter of Munshi Sheo Avtar Lal who belonged to Rafipur village in the Siwan sub-division of the erstwhile Saran district of Bihar. Munshi Sheo Avtar Lal was a mokhtar, a kind of pleader who practised in the Deoria courts in Uttar Pradesh (UP). He had a good law practice.

My eldest mama (mother's brother) Narbadeshwar Prasad, was married to Dr. Rajendra Prasad's niece, the daughter of his elder brother Mahendra Prasad. My mother used to tell us how Rajen Babu (who later became the President of India) had gone to my eldest uncle with her marriage proposal and how, in his august presence, my father's side had not been able to refuse. In any case, it was an attractive proposal. My mother, Dhana Devi, was extremely good looking, tall and slender, with fair skin and attractive features. The same could not be said of my father. It was a good match for him.

Siblings

I was the only boy in the family who did not go to the Miller school, which was the preferred school of the family. It was near the High Court and not far from our rented accommodation near Patna railway junction. All my brothers were good at studies and all of them passed their matriculation examination in the first division. The eldest one, Tuntun Bhaiya, was struck by epilepsy at the age of ten and had to be withdrawn from school. The second oldest, Bijay, was my idol. I looked up to him because he was tall, well-built and a great sportsman.

Bijay's favourite athletic event was the pole vault, something we all went on to excel in as as well. I still recall going to an annual sports day of the Patna Science College where Bijay studied, as he was taking part in the pole vault event. I watched in admiration as he cleared one bar after another till he came to the end of the ten-feet-high bar, which he also cleared in the first attempt. There was nothing left to conquer after that. A new college record in pole vault was created that day.

My father was keen that all his sons study up to graduation level, the minimum qualification needed for a Class I job in those days, as it still is. This was easier said than done, as our financial situation had become quite precarious by then. My uncles advised my father to discontinue our education after matriculation and get us whatever jobs that could be found. My father rejected such advice outright and soldiered on. Bijay went on to complete his BSc in 1944 and applied for a commission in the army.

The only decent government jobs available at the time were in the armed forces because of the War. Recruitment to the civil services had stopped completely. Bijay was called for an interview to Calcutta (now Kolkata) but was not selected. Perhaps the lack of proper clothes came in the way. He had borrowed our father's sherwani to wear for the occasion, which did not sit well on him. One can only imagine the rest!

Bijay interviewed for another army job, that of an Indian Armament Artificer – a technical, non-combat role that required him to be trained in the upkeep of guns and tanks, looking after their maintenance. After his selection, he was sent to Chaklala, near Rawalpindi, for training. He used to write to us regularly and send a part of his salary home but could only come back home on leave after nine months.

We all were terribly excited about Bijay's arrival. I insisted on accompanying my brothers to the Patna Junction railway station to receive him. As he alighted from the train, he looked completely different, clad in his army uniform and with a hat on his head. He received a hero's welcome at home, with my mother preparing the choicest of dishes for him, as we all sat down together to enjoy the feast.

Afterwards, we huddled around him and listened, in fascination, to his stories about life in the army.

Before Partition, my brother was posted to various places, many of whose names we had not even heard. Those were difficult days, with communal riots breaking out all over the country. He often had to do patrolling duty in riot-affected towns. When the War ended, he was discharged from the army, and was later selected for the Bihar Forest Service (which subsequently became the Indian Forest Service) and was sent to the Forest College at Dehradun for training.

Babuji had surely taken a wise decision in sending him to the army, as his army record came in handy for his selection to a Class l government service. He spent his entire career in Bihar and retired as a Conservator of Forests. He settled down in Ranchi where he breathed his last in early 2014.

My third brother, Amar, was the most brilliant of us all. A first divisioner and consistent topper in mathematics, he established a new record in the subject at the Master's-level examination. He returned from his convocation with three gold medals – the first for topping the MA in Math exam, the second for topping the MA and MSc Math exams and the third for securing the highest marks in all the subjects taken together.

Amar immediately found a job as a lecturer in Patna's Bihar National (BN) College. I still remember him wearing a suit to college, which was the prescribed dress for lecturers in those days. His income of ₹144 per month was an immense help to our poor family. However, my father was very keen that Amar join the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), which had just been set up to replace the Indian Civil Service (ICS).

Babuji felt that the teaching job was coming in the way of Amar's preparations for the IAS examination. So, he made him resign from the lectureship. Amar took the exam in 1949. We were all sure that he would qualify but when the results were announced, his name was missing from the list. Despite doing well in the written examination, Amar had failed to qualify in the viva voce test.

A pall of gloom descended on our family. I do not remember anyone eating a meal that day. In the dead of night, I heard someone sobbing and woke up to find that it was Babuji. I was deeply impacted by the experience and many of my decisions later in life were based on what I had witnessed that night. Amar did not take the exam the following year because my father, being over confident of his success in his maiden attempt, had told him not to apply again and waste money.

Amar's failure was a chastening experience for the entire family and my father, his dream shattered, allowed Amar to join the Bihar Civil Service where he became a deputy collector. He took the civil services exam the following year and qualified for the Indian Revenue Service (IRS). Sadly, despite securing a scholarship to

study at Cambridge University, family circumstances forced my brother to decline the offer and join the IRS instead. He died in early 1991 from Parkinson's disease.

My fourth brother, Samar, was the artist in the family. He was also the best looking among all the brothers. Keen on joining the film industry, he went to Kolkata to try his luck, only to return disappointed. Later, he did a course in labour relations and joined a private company in Kanpur as a labour welfare officer, from where he moved to a public-sector coal company in Bihar's Dhanbad.

Next to Samar was Ajit – another consistent first divisioner who topped his Bachelor's in Mathematics examination, like Amar. He also earned a scholarship, and we listened to our first broadcast when he bought a radio from this money. He appeared in the competitive examinations while still studying for his master's degree and also joined the IRS. He passed away in the US, where he had been living with his son after retirement.

My sixth brother Ranjit was a brilliant student too. For some reason, Babuji was keen that he join the armed forces. Ranjit cleared the written exam but failed to clear the interview for a commission in the army. He went on to become a doctor and later migrated to the US. He settled down there and breathed his last in 2017.

All my sisters had arranged marriages to well-off professionals. The eldest, Prema, married Sidheshwar Prasad – a civil engineer. The second, Madhuri, married Rajendra Srivastava – a veterinary doctor, while the third, Saroj, was wedded to Birendra Verma – a scientist. The fourth and youngest, Manju, was married to BBL Madhukar – an officer in the State Bank of India. Both Birendra and Madhukar became senior public-sector executives later.

* * *

Babuji had a flourishing practice that ensured life's basic comforts for us all. He set up house near the railway station on the first floor of a building, which is where the family was living when a highly destructive earthquake of 8.0 magnitude struck Bihar on 15 January 1934. Babuji had just got four of my brothers – Bijay, Amar, Samar and Ajit – admitted to the Miller school near the High Court in Patna. Tuntun Bhaiya – the oldest – was suffering from epilepsy, so he was not sent to school. When the earthquake struck, Babuji was in the High Court and four of his kids in school.

Mai was on the first floor of the house along with Tuntun Bhaiya, my sister Prema, and Ranjit, who was only a toddler. She tried to run downstairs through the staircase, but the building was shaking so violently that she had no choice but to sit on the steps of the staircase and pray. She did exactly that and kept chanting 'Ram, Ram'. It was this sight that confronted Babuji when he arrived home with the rest of the kids from school.

It seems Babuji had immediately left for the Miller school as soon as the earth stopped shaking. He found his four boys in a state of shock, huddled in a corner. He collected them and proceeded home, skirting a chasm where the earth had split and from which water was gushing out. Everyone jumped across this gaping hole and continued home. On reaching there, they collected their valuables and left the house immediately as it had become unsafe.

They spent the rest of the day and a night in a vacant plot of land near the house. Later, they shifted to a temporary accommodation in the Congress Maidan in Kadamkuan. We heard these harrowing stories of the earthquake from Mai and other dramatis personae for whom it was quite an unforgettable experience, unpleasant and terrifying.

In 1942, Babuji fell seriously ill with gout and was out of commission for an entire year. For a lawyer with a flourishing practice, this proved to be disastrous. All his prominent clients moved away to other lawyers during this period and did not return to him, making his income nosedive once he recovered and resumed his practice. His financial situation was made worse by the skyrocketing prices of essential commodities due to the Second World War.

Being a large family, we were badly hit by this double whammy. My brothers were still studying; it became tough for Babuji to afford their school and college fees. I remember several days when we had to retire to bed hungry. Most of our immovable assets were mortgaged or sold first and soon it was the turn of other valuable family possessions to go under the hammer. I came home one day after playing outside only to find my father's law library gone, but at least the kitchen fire burnt that evening.

Sometimes we were so down and out that Babuji had to approach our relatives for small loans of rupees five or ten. I would eagerly accompany him on these trips in the hope of getting some *nashta* (snacks) to eat. The humiliation of those visits still rankles me.

Being poor is a curse, but being reduced to poverty after having seen better times is even worse. This applies not only to individuals but also to nations, something I was to experience later as the country's finance minister.

CHAPTER 2

BOYHOOD

My school, Sir Ganesh Dutt Patliputra High School, was housed in a private building that belonged to a lawyer, Baldev Prasad Singh. The school had been locked in litigation with the owner for several years, over possession of the building, but the lawyer had finally won the case. One day, to our utter shock, we reached school only to see the doors locked and the benches, chairs and papers strewn all over the premises. Our teachers told us that the school would have to be moved to another location, pending which a four-month summer vacation was declared.

Nothing could have been more welcome than this news. The school was soon shifted to a thatched building not far from the old one, which was quickly constructed to get classes going again. Finally, the school had a place of its own. We celebrated our first Independence Day in the new premises. The national tricolour was hoisted and sweets were distributed among the kids.

Two years later I moved to the Patna Collegiate School, one of the best in the state. I did not want to go to the Miller school, like my brothers did, for two reasons. Firstly, it was too far away from home and, secondly, all my friends in the neighbourhood went to the Patna Collegiate School. Admission to the school was not easy. Upon my insistence, Babuji had to use his influence with the deputy director of education, Thakur Prasad, who lived across the street from us, to get me admitted.

Despite making him go through all this trouble, I was initially unhappy there with new teachers and unfamiliar surroundings and many classmates who were strangers to me. Above all that, we had a very stern class teacher, Bhanu Babu, who was not very impressed with my old alma mater, Patliputra School. Much to my chagrin, he nicknamed me ‘Patliputra’, addressing me with the annoying moniker every time he asked me a question, saying, ‘Hey Patliputra, you answer this!’ I felt like an outsider, as I have on many occasions later in life as well.

Once, when I decided to bunk classes but did not want to be marked ‘fled away’

in the attendance register, I wrote an application in English to request a leave of absence in the afternoon. Not only was my application rejected, but Bhanu Babu made me stand up and informed the class that 'Patliputra' had given an application on the false pretext of having a headache. To add insult to injury, he also pointed out three spelling mistakes in my application. I turned red in the face with shame and humiliation, something I only recovered from when I stood second in class in the final exams.

Life began to look up and I soon made several friends in school. Many of these friendships have stood the test of time. Old school friends, including Bhagwan, Keshav, Manoranjan (Manju), Christopher, Raman, Shambhu, Mahtab and Ramesh, have always remained an important part of my life. Sadly, Raman, Mahtab, Keshav, Manju and Bhagwan are no more. Bhagwan and Keshav passed away in early 2017, within a month of each other.

My brother Bijay got married in 1949, and Amar and Prema the year after. For me the most memorable moment came after my sister Prema's marriage. Being very fond of me, and finally having some money of her own to spend, she gifted me ₹15 to spend as I liked. I was thrilled. I still wore half pants but was eager to start wearing trousers, like my friends.

The first thing I did with the money, therefore, was to get a pair of full pants stitched. When I proudly stepped out in my brand-new trousers, I did so thinking that everyone would notice them and shower me with praise on my new acquisition, only to be sorely disappointed. Not only did no one compliment me but the pants themselves went completely unnoticed.

It was an important lesson: what impresses you may not impress others. In fact, it is often the case that what one person considers to be very important holds no significance at all for another.

I decided to use a part of the money to go to the famous Pintu Hotel near the railway station and have a hearty meal. I had heard that its chicken do pyaza and Mughlai paratha were out of the world. Placing the order confidently, I enjoyed every morsel and paid a princely sum of two rupees and eight annas for it. I have eaten many wonderful meals in my life, all over the world, but that meal at the Pintu Hotel is still fresh in my memory as one of the best.

Meanwhile, things were going well at school. I secured a first division in the matriculation exam in 1952, out of a total of eleven students that year who did. I also scored 97 marks out of 100 in mathematics but even this was not enough to persuade me to continue with the subject. I gave up mathematics completely, unlike the path followed by my elder brothers. Since I was not interested in science, I did not even apply for admission to the Patna Science College. Confident of getting admission to the famous liberal arts college of Bihar, the Patna College, I

did not apply for admission anywhere else either. Thankfully, the gamble paid off.

A completely new life awaited me. Without the comfort of old school companions who had opted for other colleges, I found myself seeking new friends once again.

Little did I know, I would forge one of the most complex but enduring friendships of my life there.

Patna College

Patna College is housed in an old and historic Dutch building on the banks of the river Ganga. Situated between Kolkata and Allahabad, Patna was an important trading post for the Dutch in the eighteenth century, when the Ganga river was navigable. With the end of the opium and indigo trade and the decreasing draft of the river, the importance of Patna as a river port had also declined. Under the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the British took over the building from the Dutch and converted it into a college.

Due to its colonial background, Patna College has a distinctive style of architecture. A few new blocks have been added over the years; and the geography and psychology blocks are housed in a new building near the college gate. The Intermediate (a 11+2+2 formula of school-cum-undergraduate education, instead of the current 10+2+3) and BA lecture theatres were also constructed later, away from the main old building, but were connected to it through a beautifully designed, covered corridor. Hostels like Minto, Jackson and Muslim as well as the New Hostel are also on the campus itself. Behind the main building was the Wilson Garden where we had the wonderful lawn tennis courts, which merged with the bank of the river.

The Batheja Mandap, named after an Indian principal of the college, was the students' favourite haunt and was situated right on the river. The Wilson Garden and the tennis courts stand destroyed now by the construction of a new and ugly building and due to sheer neglect. Years later, I met principal Batheja's daughter who had been the only lady student of the college in her time. She was married to an ICS officer, KP Mathrani, who was a close friend of my father-in-law.

An internal road links Patna College to the Science College and the Engineering

College further down. The Ashok Rajpath, on which the college is situated, also has the Patna Medical College and Hospital as well as the BN College. Thus, the whole Muradpur area is occupied on one side by the university campus. The other side is lined with shops and the entire area is a buzzing hub of student activity.

When I joined Patna College in 1952, just five years after India's Independence, fascinating tales of British times were still fresh in the memory of the older Indian professors. They often shared these with the newcomers. One such story, which I remember with special pride, was about Jagdish Chandra Sinha—my first cousin and the son of my eldest uncle.

He had created a new record in the BA History (Honours) examination, way back in the early 1930s. A brilliant student and a talented debater, he passed away at an early age, unfortunately, while still in his MA first year. His legend endured. Though he passed away a few years before I was born, he became a source of enormous inspiration for me for some inexplicable reason.

When I joined college, I found his picture adorning the walls of the History department, a rare honour for a student. The story goes that a British High Court judge, who had studied at Oxford, was once invited to the college to judge a debate. Jagdish was declared the best speaker. In his concluding remarks, the British judge had pointed out, 'Had Jagdish been a student at Oxford, he would have been a jewel of the Oxford Union.'

Jagdish was also a great patriot and there is another story that has stayed with me. When the Simon Commission visited India in 1928, Jagdish, with other students, protested against it on the college campus. It seems that during one such demonstration, the British principal of the college confronted the protestors and ordered them to disperse. Jagdish refused. 'If you have the right to be concerned about the future of your country, we have an equal right to be concerned about the future of our country,' he retorted fearlessly. Though I did not have the good fortune to have ever seen or met him, I must admit that he is someone who has deeply influenced me.

Finding the Perfect Fit

My sights were set on joining the IAS from the very beginning, as my elder

brothers had failed to make the cut. At the intermediate stage, I studied history and economics apart from Hindi and English. The biggest challenge for me was that all the subjects were taught in English. I had studied in a Hindi-medium school. My written English was weak and proficiency in spoken English almost non-existent. Compared to me, students from Mission schools like St. Xavier's in Patna had a distinct advantage. My elder brothers had also fared poorly in the IAS interviews because they could not speak English fluently.

I was determined to overcome this weakness.

Most of my close friends in college came from rural backgrounds and were more disadvantaged than I was. Their English was worse. One of my first friends in college was Bhagwat Mehta. He also came from a rural background and, therefore, was not of much help as far as spoken English was concerned. He joined politics later and became an MLA from Bihar. He is still a close friend. My other close friends were Shyamnarain, Vidya and Ramraj, all of whom also came from village schools. Predictably, students with a good command over the English language outshone others in most activities.

Ramaswami Mani, who had studied at the prestigious Doon School in Dehradun, soon joined our college, only adding to my sense of inferiority. He was the son of an ICS officer who was posted as a judge of the Patna High Court. His family background and schooling immediately put Mani in a class of his own, even superior to the boys from St Xavier's. Mani was no snob though, and mingled freely and happily with us all. We soon became close friends.

I decided I wanted to be as fluent in English as Mani was. Having discussed it with my three closest friends—Shyamnarain, Vidya and Ramraj—we agreed that the best way to learn English was to start speaking it and all four of us decided to converse only in English from the very next day. Our great idea turned out to be a total disaster, as we started avoiding each other completely instead. After a few days we met again, sheepish and crestfallen, and admitted that our experiment had failed miserably. Defeated, we were forced to go back to an English-less status quo.

On my part, I did not want to give up on my goal of achieving fluency in the language. However, it had to be done through other means. I was soon presented with an opportunity, an inter-college debating competition for intermediate students, to be held in Patna College. Bravely, I decided to try my luck at this debate. The first challenge was to get selected for the college team. A date for the selection was announced, with each speaker getting five minutes. I decided to write my speech and memorise it. I practised hard in the solitude of the riverbank and was thrilled when I was selected for the team, along with Ramaswami Mani, of course.

Expecting stiff competition from the Patna Science College and the Patna Women's College, I wrote and memorised my speech once again. The contest was held in the BA lecture theatre, which had seats like in a cinema hall, in ascending order—a sight that was quite imposing to us in those days. I was very nervous as I mounted the rostrum to make my speech, and rattled off the words I had memorised, without forgetting a single line. I was confident I had done reasonably well. My joy knew no bounds when the results were announced. The Patna College team had won the trophy! Ramaswami Mani was adjudged the best speaker.

It was only later that I found out that my performance had been quite disastrous. It seems I had rattled off my speech at the speed of the Punjab Mail, the fastest train known to Patna in those days. Obviously, Mani had carried the day for our team.

Still, I refused to give up. The victory of my team encouraged me enough to continue debating, helping me win several laurels in the years to come.

I also began participating actively in athletics - pole vault, high jump and long jump being my favourite events. My role model, when it came to sports, was my classmate Manas Mukherjee, apart from my brother Bijay. In our very first year in college, Manas was selected to represent the university in football. He was an excellent goalkeeper and a champion sprinter who would easily win the 100 and 200 metre races. He was also a very bright student and had done exceedingly well in the matriculation examination.

Like my brothers before me, I also made my mark in pole vault. Each one of my brothers was a role model for me in some way or the other. I learnt something from all of them. I also learnt to avoid their weaknesses. The burst of activity in college was clearly because of this. Participation in sports events, debating, plays, college trips and the National Cadet Corps(NCC) was my way to overcome the weakness they had suffered in the oral test in the competitive examination. I did not do very well myself in the IAS interview later, but it was not because of my inability to speak English fluently or lack of confidence. Perhaps it was too much of the latter that did me in.

My performance in other sporting events was also reasonably good. I was not a runner, but I would run a mile daily to build my stamina. I still remember those lonely, tiring evenings when I would run, all alone, around the football field of the Engineering College where I lived with my sister Prema and brother-in-law Sidheshwar. His house was located at the corner of the field and was the solitary one there.

In 1952, the year I joined college, my father decided to wind up his establishment in Patna. Our financial situation was precarious; all our assets had already been sold, with nothing left to fall back upon. Bijay, who was now in the

Forest Service, was posted in Gaya and Babuji decided to move there. We were still a large family of dependents, though Amar and Ajit had already joined the Income Tax service. My eldest brother, Tuntun Bhaiya, who was epilepsy-stricken, the fourth, Samar, who was still unemployed, and my three unmarried sisters had to move with my parents to Gaya. Ranjit, who was studying at the Medical College, and I had to look for alternate accommodation in Patna.

I went to live with my eldest sister in Patna, whose husband, Sidheshwar Prasad, was a professor at the Engineering College. I was thrilled to get a small room all to myself, a luxury I enjoyed for the very first time in my life. Ranjit found accommodation in the hostel attached to the Medical College. The rest of our large family moved to Bijay's place in Gaya. All rooms, even the verandah, were fully occupied in his rented house in Manpur, across the river Falgu in Gaya.

I failed to secure a first division in my intermediate exam that year and only managed a high second. With an eye on joining the IAS, I decided to take up history as my honours (major) subject and political science in the pass course (supplementary subject). The former consisted of six papers and the pass course had two papers. English and Hindi were compulsory. I had studied economics at the Intermediate stage but hated the subject and gave it up at the graduate level.

Little did I realise then that circumstances would someday force me to manage the economy of the entire nation.

My two years in the BA classes were fulfilling, rich with accolades and achievements. I managed to blossom into an award-winning debater in English and an athlete of some repute, apart from being a reasonably good student. I even began to act in English plays, almost matching my friend and rival Mani in his achievements.

However, I was still not quite there.

A few unfortunate incidents during those two years in college stand out vividly in my memory. The first was when, during the pole vault event on the annual sports day in 1955, the pole slipped from my hand forcing me to go under the bar rather than over it. The crowd burst into laughter. My initial feelings were those of shame and humiliation. This was hardly expected of a champion. I did not even notice that the awkward fall had fractured a bone in my left forearm.

As I started to walk away from the sand pit I realised that my left arm had gone limp. A preliminary examination confirmed the fracture and I was immediately

rushed to the Medical College hospital where my entire arm was put in a cast, supported by a sling, leaving me half crippled for six weeks. Somehow, the pain of that was much lesser than the shame of being embarrassed in front of the entire college. Humiliation is something I cannot bear, and have always stood up against an attempt, on anyone's part, to humiliate me. I have often suffered, all through my life, because of this trait in my personality.

It was around this time that another unfortunate incident took place. A boy in my college, far bigger and stronger than me, had, for some strange reason, taken an intense dislike to me. I had done him no harm, but he threatened to beat me up before everyone. With a broken arm, I was hardly in a position to offer any resistance. More than the fear of physical harm, it was the threat of damage to my reputation that disturbed me the most. What would my sister and brother-in-law think? How would I face them after the humiliation of being beaten up by a fellow student?

I pleaded with my friends to help, but no one was willing to take on the bully. Fortunately, good sense prevailed in the tough boy's mind and the attack did not take place at all. Sadly, the desperation and instability that may have urged him to make the threat in the first place could be judged by the fact that he committed suicide in the summer vacation that followed.

As it often is with boys, a street fight is never too far away. I was soon embroiled in one. Patna Market on Ashok Rajpath used to be a favourite haunt of students in those days. It had glittering shops selling all kinds of clothes and accessories and was always very crowded. I had gone there one evening with Shyamnarain, Vidya and Ramraj. We were strolling through the market when a group of foreign girls caught our eye.

Foreign girls in Patna Market were a rare sight indeed, and hence they were attracting a lot of attention. I soon noticed a group of rude and rowdy boys following them everywhere, even passing lewd remarks. Extremely disgusted with their behaviour, I confronted the boys and asked them to leave the girls alone. They stopped following them and we felt that the matter had been settled.

How naive and wrong we were.

We found the gang following us on our way back. Vidya left us when we reached his hostel, leaving only the three of us behind. As soon as we reached the dark, lonely spot where the road turned towards the Engineering College where I lived, they suddenly pounced upon us. A fierce fist-fight ensued. Though badly outnumbered, the three of us fought back with all our strength. Obviously, I was their main target.

The boys fled after a while but I was left hurt, with my nose bleeding profusely as quite a few punches had landed on it. We went to the hostel nearby where

Shyamnarain and Ramraj lived, and I stayed there until my nose stopped bleeding. I did not want my sister to see me in that condition. She probably did notice the injury when I finally got home but kept tactfully silent, much to my relief.

I have never felt sorry for the altercation. It was a result of standing up for the nation's honour and dignity, something I would be called upon to do on many occasions later in life. Also, I have never walked away from a fight, be it a debate in Parliament, a life-threatening illness or while representing India's interests abroad.

Back to life in college, I had been bitten by the theatre bug. The first English play that I was selected to act in was Shakespeare's 'Richard the Third'. I was cast as Hastings, a nobleman in the king's court. A scene in the play showed the king ordering the beheading of Hastings. On hearing the sentence, I was supposed to appear shocked and speechless. I tried to channel all the fine emotions of shock that I could muster.

However, the audience, instead of understanding and appreciating my acting skills, misunderstood my momentary silence and began to shout, 'Bhool gaya, bhool gaya!' (He has forgotten his lines!). My sister, Prema, whom I had invited to watch the play, told me later that she too had thought I had forgotten my lines and had been quite worried. Of course, I duly delivered my lines and was soon carried off the stage by the king's soldiers.

The Patna College plays were brilliant productions and very popular. They had period costumes and excellent direction. One of the students, actor-director Shivendra Sinha, was even awarded a scholarship to study at London University and he graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Later, when television came to India, Shivendra joined Doordarshan. He produced an award-winning film, Phir Bhi, which won the 1971 National Award for the Best Feature Film in Hindi, as well as one for its male lead, Partap Sharma. Unfortunately, Shivendra's budding career was cut short by his untimely death at an early age.

The lead role in Richard the Third was played by a handsome Muslim boy, Ejaz Kazmi. His father, a very impressive gentleman, was the principal of the B. Ed. College, which shared a campus with the Patna Collegiate School. Ejaz later joined the private sector. We renewed our friendship when we were both posted in Delhi later. Unfortunately, he was killed in a road accident near Agra, again at a young age.

Losing friends, especially those who have left us too soon, is painful. I always feel extremely saddened, and often shocked, thinking about friends I have lost along the way. Many of them have been a cherished and memorable part of my journey from the pre-Independence streets of Patna to the corridors of power in New Delhi and beyond.

Over the years, I have learnt to take both loss and disappointment in my stride, forcing myself to soldier on in the face of tragedy, as well as failure.

CHAPTER 3

COMING OF AGE

My failure to secure a first division in my BA examination disappointed me deeply. I was placed first in the second division, however, having missed first division by only three marks, a failure that still gnaws at me. Two of my batchmates had secured the first division. I felt I had let down my cousin, Jagdish Chandra Sinha, as well as my brilliant elder brothers.

Since my aim was to appear for the IAS exam, I decided to have as wide a range of subjects to choose from as possible. The IAS exam, in those days, comprised of three compulsory papers of 150 marks each – an English essay, précis writing in English and general knowledge. Additionally, you had to choose three optional papers from a range of subjects. For the IAS and the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), candidates were required to choose two additional 'advance papers' of 200 marks each, where you had to demonstrate a much higher degree of knowledge. Added to these, was an interview of 400 marks.

My elder brothers who were brilliant in studies, especially in mathematics, were pressed for choice in the IAS exams even though only three optional subjects were required in those days. There were no 'advance' papers. Apart from two math papers, they had been at a loss in choosing the third and had to settle for subjects that were completely unfamiliar to them, like law and anthropology.

Learning from their experience, I decided to change my subject for the master's degree from History to Political Science, which I had studied as a 'pass' (supplementary) subject at the BA stage. Ramaswami Mani, my arch rival by now, was a fellow student in the same course. He had moved to Madras (now Chennai) earlier but, not liking the atmosphere there, had returned to Patna University.

In our time, MA courses were conducted at the university and not the college level. The university campus was located at Darbhanga House, the palace of the erstwhile Maharaja of Darbhanga. It was returned to the government following the abolition of *zamindari!* (permanent settlement) in Bihar. Being adjacent to Patna College, it enabled us to take part in college activities, even though we were

technically not part of the college.

Most of my friends did not join the Political Science course, leaving me to forge new friendships once again. Among them was Murli Sinha who became, and still is, one of my closest friends. He had joined the university from Ranchi, where he had done his BA. Having a common campus and activities, it was easy to keep in touch with my old friends this time around.

My first year in MA (1956-57) was perhaps the best of the six years I spent on campus, as I participated and excelled in various extra-curricular activities. I had already established myself as the pole vault champion of the college and worked hard at developing my muscles. I still remember the pride and thrill I felt during the annual athletic meets, when the commentator built up momentum as I ran to take the jump, pole in hand, 'Here comes the champion, Yashwant, with his V-shaped body!' he announced. Girls in the audience giggled and I cleared the bar. Those were the days!

From sports to elections, I have never underestimated the power of having women supporters in your corner. It's a truly formidable constituency.

I was soon selected to enact a key role, that of Sergius, in George Bernard Shaw's play, 'Arms and the Man', produced by the English Association of the college. Mani acted as Captain Bluntschli. There were two other male actors, Thakur Prabhakar Singh and Anandiyo Chatterji, and three female actors, Audrey Das, Leela Singh and Vasudha. Professor Naqvi, who later migrated to Pakistan, was the director of the play. Keshav Prasad, secretary of the English Association, who was the producer went on to marry Audrey, while Leela married a classmate of hers, Priyaranjan Prasad. I still remember driving from Giridih to Patna for Kehsav and Audrey's wedding reception at the Bankipore Club a few years later.

Even in those days young people could defy their parents and the social norms of the time to marry a partner of their choice. I might just have been one such young man, but then that's another story for later.

Acting in the play was great fun, as we rehearsed it several times over. With period costumes and our acting, it turned out to be an immense success. People continued to talk about it for many months, and some of the cast members—Keshav, Audrey and Leela—remain close friends to this day. Unfortunately, Mani, Anandiyo and Thakur Prabhakar are no more.

I was also a successful debater by now, walking away with the 'best speaker'

prize in practically every contest I participated in. I reached the peak of my achievements during the Inter-University Debating Competition, held both in Hindi and English, at the Nalanda Institute of Oriental Studies. The occasion was the 2,500th anniversary celebrations of the birth of Bhagwan Buddha, and around eight or nine leading universities of the country were participating. I was selected to represent my university along with Ashok Jung Bahadur from the Science College, who later joined the Indian Police Service (IPS). We travelled to Nalanda and stayed there for three days.

I still remember the sylvan surroundings of the institute, and I practiced my oratory in the solitude of the green paddy fields. It was difficult to learn the ten-minute-long speech by rote. So, unlike my first debate in which I had memorised the entire thing, I concentrated on the main points, their sequence and the embellishments I had coined. I cannot remember the subject of the debate, but I proudly recall that I walked away with the Best Speaker's prize. We also won the 'Best Team' trophy. Ram Tavakya Sharma of Patna University was declared the best speaker in Hindi and our university team was declared the best team in the Hindi debate also. It was quite an achievement for Patna University.

It felt good to have established myself as an accomplished all-rounder in the university, and this was definitely one of the high points of my time there. This was also an adventurous time for me, as I got the opportunity to travel outside Patna and the country as well.

A fellow student and the head of the United Nations Students Association, Binay Kumar Sinha, invited me to join a delegation he was taking to Burma (Myanmar). I readily agreed. The delegation comprised both boys and girls and was led by Professor Dr. TB Mukherjee of the department of political science. I was very excited, as it was the first time I would be going abroad or even travelling in an aeroplane.

In Rangoon, we were accommodated in quite a large house of an Indian embassy official, probably a First Secretary. All the boys shared one room, and the girls another. Everyone slept on the floor. We also travelled to Mandalay, famous for its massive statue of the Reclining Buddha. It's a beautiful country and I have always regretted the fact that I did not get another opportunity to visit Burma.

The following year, a similar trip was organised by Binay to Nepal, which I was again invited to join. Fate had willed otherwise, and for some reason I could not go. Sadly, the bus bringing the delegation back from Kathmandu met with a terrible accident, killing Binay and a few others. Destiny, I believe, had saved me for something bigger. One of the survivors was Gajendra Narain, a professor and leader of the group, who later joined the IPS and rose to become Bihar's Director General of Police.

I also made two trips to Delhi that year. The first was to represent the university in the Youth Festival—a very prestigious event in which almost all Indian universities participated. Debating, dramatics, music and dance competitions ensured that it was great fun. I represented the university in the elocution and discussion segments.

The second trip was representing Bihar as an NCC cadet in the Republic Day Parade in Delhi—an opportunity I considered an honour. We lived in tents near the Palam airport, along with other state contingents for the two weeks of strenuous training that followed. Our day began with waking up at 4 a.m. in the bitter cold of January, bathing, getting ready and assembling for drill. The Major in-charge was a hard taskmaster and any deviation led to severe punishment.

We were always expected to be immaculately dressed, with special attention reserved for the shine on our boots and brass. The crease of our uniforms had to be perfect. It is here that I learnt the correct way of wearing a beret. I am disappointed to note that even senior police and army officers are often ignorant of how to wear it. I must admit that the lessons in discipline and sheer hard work, which I imbibed during the camp, have stood me in good stead later in life as well.

On the morning of 26 January, we were brought in Army trucks to the wide, open space between the North and South Blocks in front of Rashtrapati Bhavan. We assembled in marching format and, when it was our turn, marched majestically down Rajpath, saluted the President and continued all the way to the Red Fort – holding our rifles at slope arms on our left shoulder, our right arms swinging sharply all the way. I recall the blood having collected in the fingers of my right arm due to the constant swinging and I could barely manage to close my fist by the time we reached the Red Fort. The long march was tiring but the cheering crowds along the entire route helped keep exhaustion at bay.

An interesting result of my achievements in the NCC was a call for an interview for a commission in the Indian Army from the Services Selection Board. As my sights had been set on the IAS, I had applied for it quite half-heartedly. There was no written examination, and the qualifying criteria included being a graduate and having passed the Certificate C examination conducted by the NCC. Even though I had not cleared the Certificate C exam, I was allowed to appear for the interview. Certificate C could follow. I kept my plans confidential, especially from my family, though not for very long.

I had to travel to Meerut for the interview and was issued an Army railway warrant for the journey. However, I had no money for out-of-pocket expenses. On the way, I stopped at Kanpur where my brothers Samar and Ajit lived. I stayed with Samar for a day and confided my plans to him. As I boarded the rickshaw for the station, I asked him for ten rupees, apologetically and with a great deal of

embarrassment, which he readily gave me. At Meerut station, I met some of the other candidates who had come for the same interview. An Army representative received us at the station and took us to the cantonment in a military truck.

I was saved a lot of embarrassment when four of us, who had become friendly during the journey to the cantonment, went to a nearby restaurant for lunch. The ten rupees I had borrowed from Samar were not even sufficient to buy my own lunch. As the others made moves to pay for the meal, I also dived into my pocket only to be saved by one of the boys who was the quickest on the draw and paid for all of us.

It is in moments like these that I have felt the agony of being poor, of living with a constant fear of humiliation or loss of face. But these struggles have ignited a fire deep within me and taught me to face such situations with courage and dignity.

The interview at Meerut, conducted over three days, comprised of a series of both physical and mental tests. These were conducted in English only, and created problems for some of the candidates not used to speaking the language fluently. One of the tests consisted of the group moving from one tree to another with the help of two differently-sized wooden planks. I remember how, when a candidate who was tasked with leading the group during one of these exercises, asked another whom he trusted more than the others to pass one of the planks to him.

The question was in English and so was the reply, which made us burst into laughter, 'Which one? Younger one or the older one?' It was literal translation of the words 'little' and 'big' in Hindi! The desire to learn English and the pursuit of proficiency in the language can often give birth to odd expressions, causing great mirth to those well-versed in this 'foreign' language, as well as embarrassment to those not familiar with it.

I felt good during my stay in the Cantonment as, for the first time, a trained orderly was deputed to take care of me. He used to polish my shoes, iron my clothes and fetch me tea. I had already begun feeling like an officer. When the results were announced, I was extremely elated to find myself among the three selected from our group of ten. It meant not only a career in the Army but also the immediate assurance of a Class I job as a Second Lieutenant, after a year's training at the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun. I have always loved the Indian Army, and this came as a golden opportunity to realise a long-held dream.

On my way back to Patna, I stopped in Kanpur again to meet my brothers, and gave them the good news of my selection. Ajit took a philosophical view. He wanted me to first decide the kind of life I wanted to lead before deciding on a career. I also stopped in Varanasi, where my brother Amar was posted. My parents were also staying with him at the time. My mother summarily rejected the idea of

my joining the 'paltan', asserting that it was too dangerous.

My father showed no emotion. He neither dissuaded me from joining the Army nor did he encourage me to take the job. But I clearly noticed the disappointment in his eyes, as I was his last hope for the IAS. I remember returning to Patna in a confused state of mind.

The NCC officers in Patna, of course, were thrilled with my selection. A Certificate C exam was quickly arranged, exclusively for me, at Danapur cantonment, which is the headquarters of the Bihar Regimental Centre. I completed all my tasks to the best of my ability and passed the exam as expected. But at the end of the exercise, the instructor told me that had it been a real battle I would have surely been killed along with all my men. 'That is why I need the training in Dehradun', I shot back, refusing to be deterred.

My moment of reckoning finally arrived with a letter of appointment to the Army. A decision had to be made quickly but my mind was full of conflicting emotions. I had to decide between a life in the Army and a career in the bureaucracy; one of which was already in my hand while the other was still a distant dream. Finally, with a sense of great regret – and much to the dismay of the NCC officers – I declined the offer.

In the end, I remembered the sobbing of my father in the dead of the night not too long ago and realised that his sentiments were far more important to me than my own desire for a career in the Army. I could not disappoint my father in any way and felt it was my duty to live up to his expectations as far as my choice of career was concerned.

But in other matters—love, marriage and the choice of a life partner—I was determined to defy my parents if the need did arise.

Matters of the Heart

It was natural at that age to be attracted to girls, and I was no exception. We did not have co-education up to the BA stage, and students from girls' colleges used to come to Patna College only for the Honours classes. Many students in our college used to ogle at them when they did, but I considered such behaviour highly undignified, and never lined up with the others. But things were different at the

master's level where boys and girls studied together. Mutual attraction was common but very few of the lads had the courage to talk to a girl, let alone profess their love to her. Besides, in those days, the most you were permitted to say was that you were 'inclined' towards a girl.

My friend Murli became so inclined towards a pretty Bengali damsel, who took the same road to college as he did. One day the lady stopped Murli to inquire whether classes were 'on or off'. The harmless interaction was enough to set tongues wagging. We told Murli that the brief question was proof of the fact that she was also similarly 'inclined' towards him. Murli, of course, was thrilled and spent the next few days in a happy trance. The same thing happened with my friend Anwar who was similarly asked an innocent question by another girl.

As for me, I found myself attracted to Meenakshi, a brilliant student of English literature. She had topped the BA exam and joined the MA classes at Patna University. We were not in the same course, but I decided to try my luck by meeting her outside the ladies' common room. This was what the smarter boys did —they went boldly to the common room, asked the *darwan* (doorkeeper) to take their message to the girl concerned and talked to her if she deigned to come outside at all.

The girl, of course, had the brutal option to refuse; and if she chose to respond positively and came out to talk, it was taken as an indication of her 'inclination'. Meenakshi always used to respond positively to my requests. Encouraged, I even started to visit her at her Sabzibag residence. She would receive me in the drawing room where we would sit in stiff formality and chat.

This went on for months.

One day, I requested Meenakshi to meet me somewhere where we could talk privately about an important matter. She agreed to meet me at the Sinha Library in the evening. It was a famous library set up by Dr. Sachchidananda Sinha and had a massive collection of books. It was situated away from the campus, yet the brighter students used its facilities to enhance their knowledge. So, I was not surprised when Meenakshi invited me to meet her there. It was also relatively more private, given that only a few students made the effort. When I reached, I found her already there – sitting in her car, as if waiting for me.

'Out with it!' she said, as soon as I approached her.

I was equally blunt in my response. 'I want to marry you.'

'You shock me. How is it possible? I am a Bengali, you are a Bihari. We are both students, not yet settled in life. Forget it', she said.

I persisted. 'I am not suggesting that we marry immediately. We can agree to marry now but will only do so when we have settled down in life. As far as being Bihari or Bengali is concerned, love will overcome that barrier.'

Meenakshi was not convinced. She promised to remain friends with me but insisted that marriage was out of the question. I returned home completely shattered. For many months, I wandered around like a lost Majnu!

Meenakshi went on to marry Sujit Mukherji, a few years our senior in college and then a lecturer of English in Patna College. Her elder sister Enakshi came to give me the wedding invitation in the staff room of the department of political science, which I had joined as a lecturer by then, with a special request from Meenakshi to attend the wedding. And I did. I even gave her a silly present of an artificial plant with flowers and fruit that I had bought from a shop in the Patna market. The shopkeeper had convinced me that it was the best gift for a newly-wed couple as it represented the traditional Indian wish of 'phulo aur phalo' (referring to prosperity and progeny).

When I got into the IAS, she sent me a sweet note to say that I must now be convinced that life is not always a disappointment. We lost touch with each other for many years. She went on to become a famous professor and emerged as a well-known name in the literary field. Decades later, a common friend conveyed the sad news of Sujit's passing. I met her on my next visit to Hyderabad, where she lived, to condole her husband's death.

Meenakshi herself passed away not long thereafter, peacefully, while waiting for a flight at Hyderabad airport. A friend of hers conveyed the sad news to me as I was negotiating the bends of the Chutupalu Ghati on my way to Hazaribagh one day. It left me devastated.

The First Election

The year 1957 was an eventful one. Mani was nominated to the post of secretary of the students' common room by the principal of Patna College. It was the highest post a student could aspire to. Not to be left behind, I decided to contest for the post of vice-president of the debating society of the college. There was no students' union then and this was the only elected student post available, almost equal in importance to the post to which Mani had been nominated.

I was already a debater of some repute, with several trophies to my credit. Given these credentials, I fit the bill convincingly. My only true rival was Mani and

he was not available to contest. Hence, it seemed a foregone conclusion that I would win the election.

Nothing could have been more presumptuous on my part.

I had not factored in the rabid casteism rampant in Bihar. Bitter political rivalry existed between the Rajputs and the Bhumihars, both belonging to the erstwhile zamindar (landlord) class. With the scheduled castes and the middle not yet forces to reckon with, politically, the two ruled the roost. They enjoyed a high status with their wealth, land and muscle power. Sri Krishna Sinha, a Bhumihar, was the chief minister of Bihar, while Anugraha Narain Sinha, a Rajput and his arch rival, was at the number two position in the state Cabinet. I was completely unaware of the caste politics that dominated the university as well, until I announced my candidature for the election.

Out of the blue, a fellow student, Ambika Prasad Singh, a Bhumihar, decided to throw his hat in the ring. He had nothing to do with debating and his decision to contest baffles me to this day. Rudely shocked, I consulted my friends, Bhumihars among them as well. They advised me that being a Kayastha I had no chance of winning. Upset, I decided to withdraw from the contest.

Soon enough, the equally powerful Rajput lobby approached me, vowing their support and pressurising me to remain in the contest. I was surprised at the development as I did not even know many of my new-found supporters. However, their support meant a lot and improved my electoral prospects dramatically. Soon thereafter I launched my election campaign. Mani, using his artistic skills, even put up hand-made posters for me at strategic points on the campus.

I also got pamphlets made, listing my various achievements as a student. I took the canvassing very seriously, religiously going to various classrooms to address the students, snatching precious moments before the teachers' arrival. I visited all the hostels and lodges around the campus. My brother-in-law generously gave me twenty-five rupees to get these pamphlets printed. Incidentally, it was the only expense I incurred for the electioneering. The advantage in debating that I had over over Ambika was obvious to everyone.

Still, I had to learn some painful yet valuable lessons in realpolitik during the election.

Elections were also being held for the post of secretary of the debating society. Of the two candidates for the post of secretary, Priyaranjan Prasad and Shailesh Mishra, the former was an established debater and an excellent student. Shailesh was no match for Priyaranjan but he had the support of some powerful lobbies. My friends struck a deal with Shailesh under which we promised to transfer our committed votes to each other. I felt bad about it, but my supporters felt that winning the election was more important than my friendship with Priyaranjan.

The election itself was not without its share of drama. My friend, Murli Sinha, who campaigned extensively for me, struck a similar deal with a powerful Bhumihar student. Dramatically holding the tail of a cow by the banks of the Ganga, they swore allegiance to the deal.

It was definitely a missed photo opportunity.

Fortunately, I had the complete support of the girl students, which can often turn out to be a game changer in elections, as I was to realise later. There was palpable tension in the air on voting day. I was extremely edgy and nervous. Voters turned up in large numbers. Like my rival, I stood around the booth located in the students' common room, along with my friends. Once the counting started, the tension became unbearable and I escaped to the welcome solitude of the riverbank.

Over the years, I would find other ways to deal with such anxiety. Instead of trying to escape from such tense moments, I have learnt to deal with them head on.

Contesting that first election did not turn out to be a pleasant experience at all. The campaigning, the compromises, the drama and the tension, all took their toll on me. I was an extremely disturbed person that day on the shores of Mother Ganga. It was then that I vowed never to fight an election ever again.

It was a vow that I was destined to break later in life.

The counting of votes ended a few anxious hours later. My friends looked for me everywhere and finally found me, sitting alone and lost in thought, on the banks of the river. Not only had I won the election, they excitedly informed me, I had done so by a very handsome margin. I got over 600 votes more than my rival Ambika, but we carried no bitterness toward each other. He later joined the Bihar Civil Service.

My Bhumihar friends, especially Shyamnarain and Ramraj, were faced with a difficult choice in the election. They had to choose between merit (and friendship) on the one hand, and caste on the other. I felt happy that they ultimately voted in favour of merit. By winning the election, I had breached the formidable caste barrier of Bihar, a feat I was to repeat later in my political life.

CHAPTER 4

THE HOME STRETCH

Compared to the one before it, 1958 turned out to be a difficult year. My troubles began when my brother-in-law, Sidheshwar Prasad, with whom I had been staying in Patna, was transferred to the Bihar Institute of Technology in Sindri, near Dhanbad. My sister had to wind up her home in Patna and move to Sindri, along with her husband and children. I had no other place to stay in Patna and found myself at a loose end with nowhere to go.

Fortunately, my brother Ranjit had already completed his medical education and become a house surgeon, receiving his practical training as a doctor. The house surgeons stayed in a hostel called the 'Bachelors' Quarters', where my brother Ranjit shared a room with three others. As I had no other place to stay, he offered me temporary relief. Luckily for me, his roommates agreed to accommodate me in their room. One of the house surgeons generously offered to sleep in the verandah so that I could sleep in his bed in the room.

I must mention an incident here that left a deep impact on me. When I was staying in the small room at my sister's place I would often neglect my studies. I used to sleep early at night promising to get up early the next morning and study. Come morning, I would sleep on by convincing myself that I would stay up late at night and study. Days would go by, wth me caught in a vicious trap of my own making.

One morning, I got up, late as usual, to find that my sister had pushed a letter from my brother Bijay under the door. I opened it, only to be flooded with unmitigated remorse at its contents. In his missive, my brother had exhorted me to work hard now to assure myself of a good future later; while cautioning me that if I took my studies lightly I would have to suffer for the rest of my life. This admonition from Bijay brought the comfortable cycle of sleeping early and getting up late to an immediate end. I started studying seriously after that day and remembered this lesson for the rest of my life.

Sharing a room with the doctors was an enjoyable experience. I was delighted

by the delicious food on offer, as they had found an excellent cook who had worked in the Railway Catering service earlier. I still remember the spicy mutton dishes. Non-vegetarian food was something I had generally missed while staying with my sister and brother-in-law, who were vegetarians. It was more than compensated for at the Bachelors' Quarters, where one dish a day was non-vegetarian. I also loved the salad of onions, tomatoes and cucumber, with its sprinkling of salt and vinegar.

When the house surgeons visited the hospital wards in the evening, they would invariably take me along. Mistaking me for a doctor, the patients and their attendants would often start describing their ailments to me, until corrected. I greatly enjoyed being a 'doctor sahib' in those fleeting moments.

However, I was careful not to neglect my studies. Bijay's admonition was very much in my mind.

This happy state of affairs came to an end when I succeeded in securing a bed in an out-of-campus hostel called Gajadhar Mandir. It was a house belonging to the family of MK Sinha, Inspector General (IG) of Bihar Police, and was in a crowded marketplace near Machhuatoli, famous for its fish market. It may not have been the best address in town but since no other place was available in the middle of an academic year, I had little choice in the matter. Even here, I had to share a room with three others.

Those days, the more meritorious students were allotted accommodation in the post-graduate hostel. Muslim students, including my close friend Mohammad Anwar stayed at the Iqbal Hostel, and some students stayed in the New Hostel, a building with an asbestos roof. The less meritorious students stayed in out-of-campus places like Gajadhar Mandir. Understandably, the atmosphere there was not at all conducive to studies.

Personally, I felt that it was below my status to live in a place like Gajadhar Mandir and, had it not been for my unusual circumstances, I would have never stayed there. For an urban boy from Patna, Gajadhar Mandir was never going to work.

There were a few saving graces, though. One of my closest friends, Shyamnarain Singh, also stayed there. There were several shops selling snacks close by, and I especially remember the samosas and kachoris that Shyamnarain would often bring for me. Most importantly, it had the famous eating house of Mahangu nearby. Situated in a small, dingy room, the shop was a hot favourite because of its mouth-watering mutton curry and kebabs. A dish of mutton curry cost a mere fifty paise, and a full meal was still less than a rupee. My problem was that I was almost always broke and depended on my friends to treat me to these delicacies.

While I was at my sister's house in Patna, my brother Bijay used to send me an allowance of ₹25 per month. Half of it went for college fees and the rest was pocket money. On joining the hostel, Bijay raised the amount to ₹50. It was very generous of him, especially since I knew how tough it was for him to even spare that much.

Given all this, my decision to shift out of Gajadhar Mandir in the summer was an easy one. I had found accommodation in the New Hostel within the campus. Most of the students had gone home during the two-month-long summer vacation. Only those in their final year of MA stayed back as examinations were due in July. There were two other boys in my room, which was a relief because many believed that the place was haunted. Murli, who lived nearby with his professor brother, would often turn up late at night and try to frighten me by making weird sounds from under the window on the desolate side. Somebody had even discovered a piece of human flesh nearby, it seems.

The rooms had no fan and the heat was unbearable, made worse by the lack of a false ceiling under an asbestos roof. I learnt to adjust, opting to study at night and sleep for a few hours during the day. My fellow residents kindly permitted me to keep the light on in my corner of the room. I also hired a small table fan, which was a great luxury. This became my routine – studying throughout the night and sleeping for a few hours during the day – and I followed the same even when I was preparing for the IAS exam. I found that I could concentrate better at night, as there were no distractions except Murli's occasional ghost visits.

A stress buster I enjoyed during my exams was to watch a movie the evening before they were held. I would finish revising my course work by the afternoon for a paper the following day, freshen up and go to a movie theatre to see my favourite film. I would then eat a light dinner and go to bed early, waking up prepared, fresh and relaxed the following morning.

For some reason that I have never been able to fathom, I have great interest in stories of raw courage. This makes me extremely fond of movies like Amitabh Bachchan's *Deewar* or Shatrughan Sinha's *Kalicharan*. It's for the same reason that I like war movies a lot. As a young lad in college, I remember going to a cinema hall to watch an English war movie called *A Yank in Korea*. My interest in this movie also stemmed from my deep interest in the Korean war of 1951, which I had followed closely. I have followed the wars in our own subcontinent with equal interest. I am glad that movies relating to war or the fight against terrorism are being made in India with a new-found vigour. I continue to watch them with great interest. Both Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan, who have starred in some of these movies, are my great favourites, as is Nana Patekar.

I also enjoy watching comedies, as well as family movies like *Kabhi Khushi*

Kabhi Gham. Years ago, I remember I had gone to Hyderabad for a function when I was leader of Opposition in the Bihar assembly. There, I used one of my free evenings to go and watch *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun..!* at a cinema hall all by myself.

The MA examination turned out to be the toughest academic exam of my life, even tougher than the one for the IAS. Even though I faced it bravely, there were many who almost chickened out. Long exam times meant furious writing for up to four hours. I remember being overcome by crippling pain in my right arm the evening before my second paper and spending the night in sheer agony. Another friend, Hari Narain Sharma, found it even tougher to take the exam due to the same problem, until we persuaded the authorities to allow him to squat on the floor and write the paper! My friend Anwar, in fact, decided to 'drop out' altogether after the first paper. It took all my persuasive powers to get him to stay when he turned up to bid me goodbye, all his luggage duly loaded in a rickshaw. The stress and tension did take their toll on us sometimes.

As a result, dropping out of the M.A. exams was considered an honourable enough act—a recourse preferred by many who thought they would not fare as well as expected. In fact, the topper in our batch, Jugal Kishore Sinha was a dropout from the previous batch. So, we heaved a collective sigh of relief when the exams finally ended. The time had come for saying goodbye, for hugs, handshakes and exchange of addresses. We were all very excited, albeit fully aware that we were headed toward an uncertain future.

Years later, when Anwar was posted as the principal of the Indian Embassy School in Saudi Arabia, he sent me a stinging letter when I joined the BJP, accusing me of 'pretending' to be committed to liberal values while actually being 'a hardcore narrow-minded fundamentalist'. However, we did not allow our politico-ideological differences to sour our friendship and continue to be very close friends to this day.

Here, I must also mention Dr. KK Dutta—the famous historian and author of many books on history. He was the principal of Patna College and the chief warden of all the hostels on the campus. I would often visit him at his residence and listen to his genuine words of wisdom, even accompanying him on his evening walks around the football field. He was a voracious reader and had once told me how he felt 'antiquated' if he missed reading the morning newspapers. It's an invaluable habit I picked up from him. In fact, one of the best times of my day is in the

morning, when my wife and I sit down with cups of tea and read the newspapers.

Given all the free time I had after my exams, I decided to visit all my brothers and sisters. It ended up becoming a veritable 'Bharat darshan' as they lived in various parts of the country. Meanwhile, the MA results were announced. I had secured second position in the first division.

It was around this time that I arrived at Agra, my last stop and where my brother Amar was posted as an Income Tax officer. As soon as my father saw me arrive there in a rickshaw, he rushed out to meet me.

'*Arrey*, you are here?' he called out excitedly. Those were the days of rare landline phones and no mobiles, and communication was not as fast as it is today.

'Why? What happened?' I asked, taken aback.

'You should be in Patna. You have been called there for an interview for the post of lecturer in Patna University. The interview is tomorrow!' I had casually applied for the post before setting off on my trip, only to completely forget about it later. It seems my friend Keshav Prasad had sent a telegram to my father, informing him of the impending interview.

Babuji immediately bundled me into a car and we rushed to Tundla Junction to catch a train. Fortunately, the Toofan Mail – not quite living up to its name – and from which I had alighted just a short while ago, after traversing various stations and stops in Agra, was still standing at the station. I barely managed to jump in before the train blew its whistle and chugged off. I reached Patna the following day, just in time for my interview in the vice chancellor's office.

I was selected for the post of lecturer, along with Mani, who was now back from Harvard with a master's degree in political science. Even though I had been selected, I soon received a message from the V-C. 'You should not have rocked in your chair all through the interview,' he admonished me sternly. Later, both Mani and I appeared before the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) headed by KSV Raman, an ICS officer whom I also knew well. He often used to come to the campus to judge our debates and was a familiar figure, so I felt comfortable in the interview with him around. Once again, both Mani and I were selected for the job, even though there were many candidates with PhDs who had also appeared for the interview.

My appointment as a lecturer, first temporarily and later on a permanent basis, was an unbelievable piece of good luck. Two of our teachers, Gajendra Narain and

Digvijay Singh had qualified for the Indian Police Service and the Railway Traffic Service, respectively, and had left their teaching jobs to join their new assignments. This had created two vacancies as soon as our MA results were declared, and we were lucky to be selected as their replacements.

We had a rather rocky start as lecturers. Our appointment was in the post-graduate department of political science where the students were only a year or two junior to us. Many were close friends. They found it hard to accept us as teachers who had to be treated with respect. This led to much bullying, catcalls, heckling, foot-stomping and a lot of teasing.

For me, the mitigating factor was that Mani was heckled more than I was. Often, other classes near ours had to be suspended due to the noise emanating from our classrooms. Somehow, we carried on and soon got the better of our students. Everybody knew that we were only birds of passage, since Mani and I were preparing to take the IAS exam the following year, and most people were quite sure of our success.

The lecturer's job came as a great boon to me. For the first time, I enjoyed financial independence, with a stately salary of ₹220 per month and a dearness allowance of ₹30. My cousin, RC Sinha, an IAS officer who was chairman of the Patna Improvement Trust, arranged a small, two-room flat for me on rent in Rajendra Nagar. Till then I had been staying at the Agarwal Hotel near the railway station, which belonged to a wealthy classmate of mine from Patna College, Rai Abhay Krishna. The food there was vegetarian and very tasty, but it was not an address commensurate with the status of a university lecturer. It was also further from the university than my new flat.

Another advantage was that Veena Mazumdar, a teacher of ours from the political science department, stayed in a flat right opposite mine. She had been of immense help to me as a student and, later, as a colleague. An unconventional woman with a great sense of humour, she remained an intermittent part of my life, often encouraging me to explore new intellectual avenues.

Babuji soon arrived to stay with me. His main aim was to ensure that I worked hard and undisturbed for the IAS exam. I deeply resented this intrusion as I felt I had done well enough in my studies without any supervision from him so far. He was a terror to my friends and would often scold them for wasting my time. As a result, they soon stopped coming to my place altogether, and he was successful in isolating me from them as I prepared for the exam.

The teaching job kept me abreast with the latest developments in my subject and helped immensely with my studies. I was also able to utilise the well-stocked university library, an advantage that my other friends, who were also preparing for the exam, did not enjoy. Though I lived modestly I could afford a domestic helper,

further facilitating my efforts.

My cousin (mausi's son), Hareshwar Dayal, or Bhaiyaji as he was better known, who was also studying for the IAS, was sent by his parents to stay with me so that we could study together. Mercifully, he did not complain when I studied through the night with the light on. On the morning of the exam, sheer nervousness drove him to visit the toilet a little too often, but Babuji was even more nervous. Each time Bhaiyaji would make for the washroom, Babuji would stand at the door and urge him anxiously, saying 'Hurry up! Hurry, go! You're getting late!'

Meanwhile, Mani and I had had a minor falling out and were not on speaking terms. Though we had the same subjects, were teaching in the same department and meeting regularly in the staff room, we had no idea how the other was preparing for the exam.

I took one month's leave before the exam to concentrate on my studies. I was holed in and rarely left the flat, under my father's strict supervision. I did not meet anyone either. At last, when the exam ended, and I went out into the town, I felt the nip of the October air and realised how much I had missed out on over the preceding months.

A Call and a Letter

I resumed my job at the university, weighed down heavily by the huge burden of expectations that my family, especially my father, had placed on me. Everybody believed that Mani and I would certainly make it to the IAS, but I never allowed myself to feel as confident.

The interviews started in January 1960, and Mani was the first to receive the letter summoning him for the same. On his return to Patna after the interview, he was already being treated as a celebrity. I vividly remember the Annual Sports Day of the college that year. Mani was the centre of attraction, being showered with a hero's adulation, while I was nagged by doubts about ever receiving that all-important call.

I also recall that it was on this day that Mani and I started talking to each other again, after a gap of many months. He was aware of my anxiety and advised me to consult a famous astrologer in Patna whom he knew well enough. He took me to

him and the gentleman welcomed him warmly but treated me as his flunkey. He told Mani that he would surely make it to the IAS but looked long and hard at me when asked about my prospects, as if he was trying to read the lines on my forehead. He shook his head and solemnly announced, 'No, my friend. You will not be able to make it this time!'

His prediction completely crushed me, and my mood was only made worse by the missing letter (and good news) that refused to arrive. I spent the next few days in sheer agony. My father kept a stoic silence, though I could see that he was also under great stress.

Then, one afternoon, my friends Keshav Prasad and Priyaranjan Prasad, who had also taken the exam, came home and asked me excitedly, 'Yashwant, what is your roll number?' They were carrying a copy of the *Times of India*. By then, I was sweating with nervousness.

'Why do you ask?' I managed to enquire hesitantly.

'The roll numbers of those called for the interview have appeared in this newspaper,' explained Keshav.

Holding my breath, and almost trembling with excitement, I whispered the hallowed number. The few minutes they took to search for it seemed like an eternity to me but, lo and behold, my roll number was right there in the list! I almost wept with joy and snatched the paper from their hands in disbelief. The three magical digits stared me in the face. Yes! There it was—522—my roll number, very much a part of the list.

I ran to Babuji and blurted out the exciting, much-awaited news. He too was overcome with joy. I was on cloud nine after this and waited eagerly for that elusive letter to arrive, even as I felt bad for my two friends who had brought me the happy tidings. They had both failed to make the cut.

The missive arrived soon enough. I was summoned to appear for the interview either on 8th or 9th February 1960, (I cannot remember the exact date now) at Dholpur House on Shah Jahan Road in New Delhi. Preparations for the interview quickly got underway. I got a suit tailored in Patna from the money my brother Ajit had sent me for this purpose, settling for a thick wollen fabric in light grey, being woefully unaware of the colour protocol for such occasions. The suit should have been dark, if not black, it seems. I bought a new tie with some design on it. No doubt my ensemble must clearly have screamed 'mofussil'.

I reached Dholpur House on time and was directed to a room where several other candidates were also waiting. All of us were visibly nervous and fidgety, so the conversation was restricted to mere introductions. Soon the interviews began, with each candidate being called into the room as the next one nervously awaited his or her turn on a chair just outside it.

The interview consisted of two stages. The first was a conversation with the chairman and the other members of the interview board, while the second stage comprised of the candidate's written account of the interview itself, to be recorded in a separate room. When I finished my interview, I found another candidate, Moosa Raza, waiting anxiously for his turn outside the room. I looked at him and said confidently, 'See you in Mussoorie!' Moosa later told me, when we did meet in Mussoorie, that he had felt quite devastated by my remark. *'How can anyone be so confident?'* he had thought before entering the interview room.

'Moosa, I was not merely confident of myself, I was also sure about you,' I explained, 'See, are we not the only two from that group of ten who made it to the IAS?'

I recall having faced the Board confidently, even giving wrong replies with supreme self-assurance. The entire interaction lasted about twenty minutes and two of my answers are worth mentioning. We had been talking about India's struggle for freedom, and I made a reference to the Round Table Conference. Suddenly a member threw a question at me, 'What is the first reference to a "round table" in history?' Without batting an eye, I replied, 'King John and the Knights of the Round Table!'

The board was ominously quiet till the member from the IPS queried, 'You have been an athlete and a member of the NCC, where you have done well. Why have you given such a low preference to the IPS?' I had placed the police service at the sixth or seventh position after the IAS, the IFS and some other central services. Looking him straight in the eye, I replied, 'Why should my being in the NCC condemn me to the police service?' Some of the members chuckled at this. I remember being quite pleased with myself, thinking I had earned a few brownie points.

I wrote a summary of the interview and went outside to where Babuji was waiting for me. I told him about the questions and my answers. Much to my dismay, he correctly pointed out that it was not King John, as I had mentioned, but King Arthur (and his Knights of the Round Table). To make matters worse, he ominously added that I should start preparing for the following year's examination.

From Delhi, we set off for my brother Ajit's place in Dehradun. An Income Tax officer, my brother was also disappointed on learning that my interview had not gone well. Yet, everyone waited for the results eagerly. In Dehradun, the morning papers used to arrive a day late. Every morning, Babuji would get up before everyone else, sit outside on the verandah of the house, wait for the newspaper and pore over it, looking for the IAS results. Finally, one day, when the whole household was still asleep, he came running into the house, trembling with excitement.

‘The IAS results are out! Mukund, you have made it! You have made it! You are quite high in the list.’ Babuji shouted, hardly able to control his joy. By now, all of us were wide awake. I ran to my father and grabbed the paper from his hand. I saw that my name figured at number twelve in the IAS list and at number five on the IPS list. Mani was at number five in the IAS list, seven places ahead of me.

My mother expressed her joy in her own quiet and dignified way. There was no celebration over my success as my nephew Ajay was down with fever. But, of course, we were all treated to my mother’s delicious cooking that day, as she made a special meal for us. She was an excellent cook and others found it difficult to match her cooking, even her vegetarian dishes. My mother also liked singing and was especially fond of Bhojpuri folk songs. I still remember some of her famous wedding songs. She used to hum softly when she was in a good mood. I remember her humming that entire day, and understandably so.

A few details about my IAS results are worth mentioning. I had done extremely well in the written exam, with almost the same marks as the topper, Jagannathan Murli. However, I scored a mere 140 out of 400 in the interview, which had brought my final score down considerably. Both Murli and Mani had scored 265 in the interview, a whopping 125 more than me. This took Murli to the top and Mani to the fifth position. With 280, Salman Haider had scored the highest marks in the interview that year and was placed second, after Murli. He joined the IFS and went on to become the foreign secretary of India.

I took heart in the fact that I had got a hundred marks more than Mani in the written exam and was tied with R. Rajgopal at the eleventh position. But according to the rules, in case of a tie, the candidate with more marks in the interview was placed higher. Naturally, I went down to the twelfth position to Rajgopal’s eleventh.

I must mention a word here about Manas Mukherji, who was a distinguished all-rounder and would have been a perfect fit for the IAS. Unlike Mani and I, he did not get a job immediately after the MA results were declared. He studied hard for the IAS exam and wrote a few papers, but while the exams were still on he received a letter of appointment as a probationary officer in the State Bank of India, for which he had appeared earlier. It was a coveted job and Manas decided to skip the rest of the papers of the IAS exam and take what was in hand. I tried to persuade him, but to no avail, and have always regretted the fact that he did not complete the exam. Manas would surely have made it to the IAS, along with the rest of us and deservedly so.

When I returned to Patna, I had already acquired celebrity status. Warm hugs, celebrations and garlands greeted me. I had come back to my hometown like a conquering hero.

I had just a few months of time left in the city, as I was expected to report to the IAS Academy in Mussoorie on 16 May 1960. Babuji, having fulfilled his paternal duty of looking after me as I prepared for the exams, had stayed back in Dehradun with the rest of the family. I was alone now in my small Patna apartment and thoroughly enjoyed the three months of my new-found freedom. Success in the IAS certainly added a sure and certain stamp of quality to those who made it and even my students suddenly seemed more respectful and receptive.

A related, and rather interesting development was that I had suddenly become the most eligible bachelor in town and was flooded with proposals from eager parents. I had no particular preferences after the misadventure with Meenakshi, and so I would give a standard reply to all such overtures, 'Please contact my parents.'

A most memorable event was the warm and grand farewell that Mani and I were given by Patna University's department of political science. It was a rather large gathering, comprising of students, faculty members and even teachers from other departments. A sumptuous feast was laid out on the sprawling lawns of Patna College, on the banks of the river Ganga. Encomiums were heaped on us by our faculty members and by those very students who used to show scant respect to us during classes.

Mani gave a stirring and emotional speech, praising me magnanimously. 'My getting into the IAS is no big deal,' he said, 'but for Yashwant it is a most remarkable achievement. I am aware of the struggle he has gone through to reach here.' While it seemed to cement our bond of friendship all over again, some friends felt that the remarks were condescending and reflected his snobbery. I guess it summed up the complexity of our relationship.

I resigned from my post of lecturer at Patna University and left for the Academy on 14 May 1960, taking a train to Dehradun and then a bus to Mussoorie.

This was a journey reserved for the lucky few who had made it to the IAS and other central services. I had achieved it after a long and difficult struggle. Mani's remark at our farewell function may well have been tongue-in-cheek but he had been spot on. It was also the beginning of a completely new, and long-coveted adventure – one I had eagerly waited to embark on.

Officers-in-Waiting

SAT Narayanan was the administrative officer of the Academy and oversaw allotment of accommodation to the probationers, among other things. I was lucky to get a place in a two-room suite at the Charleville main building with two other colleagues. One of them was an IAS officer, the late Vinod Nayar, who was allotted the Maharashtra cadre. The other, who was from the IPS, stayed only for the five-month foundation course and then left for the Police Academy. This gave both Vinod and me a room each. We had a bearer who made the beds, brought us tea in the morning and looked after other details like laundry. All this comfort was quite new for me.

The other main accommodation at the Academy was Happy Valley, located west of Mussoorie's Dalai Hill with views of the Jaunpur mountain range and Nag-Tibba peak. The area is known for hosting the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan government-in-exile for a year, from April 1959 to April 1960, before they moved base to Dharamsala. However, it was at a lower level than the main block and staying there involved a small climb to reach the campus. At the Charleville main building, we were at a vantage point with both classrooms and the mess being close by.

A separate block on the main campus housed the lady officers. Both buildings faced lush lawns, with the offices of the director and deputy director at one end. Aditya Nath Jha (ICS) was the director of the Academy with RK Trivedi (IAS) as the deputy director. Another deputy director, Brigadier Sharif, joined the Academy later that year. We had a good faculty who taught us various subjects like economics, criminal law, public administration, languages, horse riding and even gardening—all that was needed to make us worthy of our new-found responsibilities and status in society, as well as in the discharge of our duties later.

Of course, the most colourful of them all was Subedar Naval Singh, our riding instructor. Any narrative of my stay in Mussoorie would be incomplete without a mention of him and his horses in some detail. Naval Singh had been a subedar (a mid-level junior commissioned officer) in the Indian Army and was an exacting taskmaster. Many anecdotes from my Academy days feature him prominently. He spared nobody, not even the ladies. Unfortunately for us, the stable—brought from

Delhi—consisted of new and untrained horses. Thus, the probationers and the horses were being trained together, with consequences that can easily be imagined.

Normally a good rider, I suffered a nasty accident once, when the horse I was riding cantered too close to the one ahead of it. Smelling danger, the animal in front kicked out hard with its hind legs and caught me in the calves. The kick was so brutal that it cut through my breeches, tore my flesh and made me bleed—a deep wound for which I had to receive medical attention. Still, I was luckier than Kusum Kapoor, a lady probationer who had a nasty fall where she hit her head against a small rock, fainted and had to be hospitalised for many days.

Horse-riding, no longer part of the IAS training curriculum, was very useful both physically and mentally. It prepared us to face tough situations and do some quick thinking—an essential ingredient of any IAS officer's job. As for me, my hard knocks taught me to get right back in the saddle, no matter what.

Life in Mussoorie was akin to staying in a hostel, especially since there were so many of us. However, the quality of food and living conditions made it a little superior to an ordinary college dorm. One exam at the end of the year was crucial for our ranking but enjoying our new life in Mussoorie was also very important. Birds of a feather flock together, they say, and it was very easy for the like-minded to form groups. I soon joined a group of compatible probationers who hung out together.

We would go for walks and generally indulge in *gupshup* (chitchat) during our spare time. This group, cutting across cadres, included SK Lall, SL Kapoor, Harshvardhan Goswami, BK Goswami, AK Saikia and a few others. I was also very friendly with J. Murli and the others who had been allotted the Bihar cadre, like CR Venkatraman, MC Subarna, RK Srivastava and Mahendra Singh. MC Gupta and KK Mathur were also in the category of special friends.

As expected, I was allotted the Bihar cadre along with seven others from our batch. I had given the IAS as my first preference, along with Bihar as my state cadre. The IFS was my second choice. There were two reasons for this—the first because my friend, Mohammed Anwar, advised me that the IFS would take me away to distant lands where there would be nobody to celebrate my successes. He quoted a popular Hindi proverb, '*Jungle mein mor naacha, kisne dekha*?' (Who sees a peacock when it dances in the forest?) to buttress his argument.

The second was my strained relationship with Mani at the time I was filling out the form for the exam. We were not on talking terms, but I had heard that he had given the IFS as his first preference. I wanted to maintain a distance from him and had given IFS as my second choice, thus ruling out joining that service. A change of mind later was not allowed. Much to my surprise, Mani changed his choice to the IAS after the results were declared. He was allowed to do so as a special case.

He not only joined the IAS but was also allotted the Bihar cadre.

Thus, my well-laid plan to avoid him had come unstuck. Fortunately, we had largely patched up our differences by then, though the competitive aspect of our friendship remained dominant. Jagannathan Murli, the topper of our batch, was the son of a Bihar-cadre ICS officer, S. Jagannathan. Following in his father's footsteps, he had also asked for and got the Bihar cadre.

This pushed me to the third place in my batch in the state cadre despite my fairly high position in the all-India list. Two tribal colleagues from Bihar, MC Subarna and Mahendra Singh, also got Bihar. Apart from Murli, the other non-Biharis allotted the Bihar cadre were CR Venkatraman, Sanat Chaturvedi and Ramakant Srivastava. Venkatraman's brother, CR Vaidyanathan of the 1953 batch, was also in the Bihar cadre. Ramakant and Sanat both belonged to UP.

The Academy's deputy director, RK Trivedi, soon busied himself getting acquainted with all the probationers, cadre-wise. At the appointed time, all of us from the Bihar cadre filed into Trivedi's office. Much to my dismay, the social and economic background of our parents once again reared its ugly head as Trivedi spent most of his time talking to Mani and Murli, and understandably so, for both were sons of ICS officers. He enquired after their parents and was particularly generous towards Mani, commenting on his familiarity with the terrain around Mussoorie, given his schooling in Dehradun. He was quite perfunctory with the rest of us.

I left the meeting feeling disappointed at the discrimination that was as real at the Academy as it had been in school and college. The arrival of Ramaswami Mani on the scene had often brought it dramatically to the fore. I remember another incident when Mani had taken me to the famous Bankipur Club to meet some Rotarians. One of them was my second cousin who was in the police service. He pretended not to know me when I was introduced to him and continued to ignore me even after I told him that I was the son of Bipin Babu. I felt very bad, and such humiliations only steeled my resolve to overcome them someday.

The director, Aditya N. Jha, was a tall, hefty and impressive-looking gentleman, with an imposing presence. He belonged to a family of educationists from Allahabad and his brother, Amar Nath Jha, was the vice chancellor of Allahabad University. Aditya N. Jha later served as the Lt. Governor of Delhi.

He likened his role as director of the Academy to that of the captain of a ship who emerges only during a crisis. Bearing this principle in mind, he did not conduct any classes but mingled freely with the probationers. Very fond of telling jokes, he was once asked by a rather diminutive probationer, 'Sir, how do you remember so many jokes?' Jha pulled himself up to his full height, looked down at the probationer and said in a booming voice, 'By sheer repetition, young man,

sheer repetition!' His jokes revolved mostly around horse-riding and his own training days, much like our anecdotes featuring Subedar Naval Singh. Obviously equestrian pursuits had been a problem with probationers even during the British era.

I must confess that I hardly took my studies at the Academy seriously. For my friends and me, it was like being back in college, complete with our gleeful pranks and carefree attitude. Schoolboy shenanigans like pulling the chair out from under a probationer when he stood up to ask yet another foolish question was par for the course, followed by peals of laughter that followed his fall. Under Mani's leadership, we formed a group that included many non-Biharis as well, and often sang Bihari folk songs on special occasions for an appreciative audience.

Being an adventurous lot, our gang never shied away from treks and horse riding. I remember our trek to Chakrata. There were six of us—SL Kapoor, Basant (Billu) Goswami, Harshvardhan Goswami, SK Lall, AK Saikia and me. We set off for the two-day trek without the help of porters, carrying all our stuff in rucksacks. We spent the first night in a village and ate whatever our hosts had to offer. Billu was good at managing things and had persuaded a family in the village to cook a meal for us.

On the way, we crossed the Yamuna valley. Strangely, we noticed that on one side of the Yamuna valley the custom of polyandry was prevalent, while on the other it was polygamy. Our lady host, who cooked a meal for us, was married to more than one brother in the family. The men-folk, away working in cities perhaps, took turns as householders.

Arriving at Chakrata, we checked into a small hotel, the only one we could afford. The tiny room barely managed to fit us all on the floor. The cramped lodgings inspired the joke that should any of us need to turn, we would have to warn the others so that we could all do so together!

The Chakrata trek was extremely delightful despite being strenuous and exhausting. It was also very enlightening. We learnt never to trust a local to give the correct estimate of distances. Every destination we enquired about was just 'around the bend'. Of course, each milestone came only after we had turned many corners. The journey itself overshadowed the destination, and the trek turned out to be an unforgettable experience that we still talk about whenever we meet.

My batch of 1960 was the first to train for a full year at the Academy in

Mussoorie. The previous batch of 1959 had spent half of its time at Metcalfe House in Delhi, and the other half in Charleville in Mussoorie as the Academy had been moved there in the middle of the course.

Bingeing on Bharat

Every batch of probationers had to undertake a 'Bharat Yatra' (journey around India) lasting almost a month, to help them understand the country better and see places that most of them had not visited before. It was intended as an immersive experience, one that would take us around parts of the country that we would soon be tasked with administering.

Considering that winters in Mussoorie are harsher than those in Delhi, this important journey had been scheduled for winter. Before that, in August, we travelled to Delhi. Our duty, among other things, was to serve as ushers during the Independence Day celebrations at the Red Fort. It gave us an opportunity to spend a few days in the capital city. Since a few of us had no place to stay in Delhi, we continued to stay in the same railway 'bogey' (coach) that we had travelled in from Dehradun to Delhi, and which remained parked at the New Delhi railway station.

The 'Bharat Yatra' itself was an exciting and enriching experience. We travelled in that special bogey, which was attached to various trains during the trip and, on most nights – once again – we stayed in the bogey itself, including when the train stopped at stations for the night. We travelled to many parts of the country, especially the South. Many of these places were new to me. We met many government officials and politicians during our travels but the most important, of course, were meetings with the then prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the president of the country, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, during our visit to Delhi.

Our meeting with prime minister Nehru helped cut us down to size. Addressing our group, he said, 'You all must be quite full of yourselves as you have succeeded in joining the best service in the country. Many of you must be thinking that you are first raters but, in reality, you are second raters, as you have not shown any sense of adventure in your life. You have preferred the warm blanket of security provided by the IAS, rather than going out there and taking risks.'

I was deeply influenced by Nehru's words and many of my decisions and responses later in life were based on what he had said that day in Delhi. He held forth, telling us what he expected of us while we were in the service. The President was pleasant, as well as a picture of dignity and grace. We also met several ministers and senior officials in Delhi.

There were other important lessons that lay in store for us.

Psychologically, I passed through many phases after qualifying for the IAS. The first phase was one of euphoria, marked by a feeling of having conquered the world, of feeling like there was absolutely no one like me in the entire universe. That bubble was burst as soon as I landed in Mussoorie for training. It is here I realised that not only were there others like me, there were some who were far smarter than me. That was the first climb-down.

The second came when we went to our respective state cadres. Earlier, while under training we were received by the senior-most functionaries wherever we went. It almost seemed as if the deputy commissioner of a district was hardly worth our while, given our interactions with superior officers and ministers, including chief ministers. It was only when we finished our training at the Academy and went to our respective state cadres and districts for further training, that we realised the importance of the DC in a district. Suddenly, he was our boss with the power to undermine our careers if he so wished. That was the second climb-down.

Later, those of us who were allotted the Bihar cadre were sent for survey and settlement training. We had to walk for miles every day, from village to village, to measure land holdings. We had no vehicles at our disposal, even as the local block development officer (BDO) had one. This phase gave us, as SR Adige, a Bihar cadre IAS officer of the 1959 batch, put it, 'a worm's eye view of life'. This was the third climb-down.

Finally, we were given substantive and independent charge of a sub-division. Along with power came the 'jhanjhat' (hassle) of dealing with politicians for whom nothing was sacrosanct except their own self-interest. It often led to humiliation and unwanted conflict for an officer. Thus, the fourth and last climb-down was the most devastating in terms of a reality check: the IAS was not so great after all.

However, there was one area where being an IAS officer did indeed count for a lot and that was the marriage market. I believe not much has changed there even today.

A New Partnership

The most important event that took place during my stay in Mussoorie was my marriage. It wasn't something I had given much thought to yet, busy as I was, preparing for an exciting new career that lay ahead of me. I suppose I had escaped it for as long as I possibly could. My joining the IAS had already made me the most eligible bachelor in my community, nation wide.

Amongst the flood of marriage proposals was one from NC Shrivastava, an ICS officer from the old Central Provinces (CP) and Berar cadre, which had become the Madhya Pradesh cadre after Independence. He had been specially sent to take charge of the Bhilai Steel Plant, after having held various posts in the central government, including being in-charge of relief and resettlement of the refugees who had flooded Delhi after the trauma of Partition.

His daughter, Nilima, who had studied at the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Delhi and was now studying at Lady Irwin College, was the one who my parents finally selected for me. I had not yet met her and had only seen her photograph, but for me that had been good enough. She looked quite charming in the photo and I willingly went along with parents choice. I thought my nod would be the end of the matter as we, the 'boy's side', had said 'yes' to the proposal. Little did I know that Nilima had other ideas.

Nilima's mother, whom we lost recently at the age of 99, was the daughter of Raja Radhika Raman Prasad Singh—the Raja of Surajpura, a princely state in Bihar. He was also a famous Hindi writer who had authored many bestsellers. Obviously, the family belonged to a much higher social stratum than ours. Rejecting the common view that one should not marry a girl from a higher social echelon, my father had adopted the practical approach instead, believing that such alliances would further his sons' careers. I was far above such considerations. For me, the only thing that mattered was the girl and my approval was clearly based on that consideration alone and not on her family's status.

Nilima—a quintessential Delhi girl who had lived all her life at 6, Ashoka Road in Lutyen's Delhi before joining college—refused outright to marry a 'dehati' Bihari boy. When she was persuaded not to reject me out of hand without at least seeing me, she agreed to do so, albeit reluctantly. Her parents kept this 'inspection' a closely-guarded secret that neither my family nor I was aware of.

Nilima's family came to Mussoorie from Bhilai and stayed at a house in a building complex called 'Koshak', where I was invited for tea. I went in excitedly, thinking I was about to meet my fiancée, completely unaware that I had to first be 'displayed' for her approval. Nilima later informed me that she had taken a good look at me through the keyhole of the next room. Not only this, she also listened to our conversation with her parents, who flatly rejected my request to meet her. They made some lame excuse, with the result that I could not see her that evening and

returned to the Academy thoroughly disappointed.

The issue of her approval of me, as I was to eventually learn from her, was discussed later that night within the family. Her younger sister Arti was also there and everyone was vastly relieved when Nilima coyly told them that she was 'okay' with the proposal. I was invited by her parents to visit them again the following day and was finally allowed to meet her.

On my part, I was completely floored by her good looks and personality. With a single stroke, she erased the past completely from my consciousness and I became irrevocably hers in that brief meeting.

Once the mutual approval process was out of the way, there was nothing to stop us from meeting every day during her family's stay in Mussoorie. The news of our engagement became known to everyone soon enough and was celebrated by my friends at the Academy. We were now free to go for long, romantic walks on the misty Camel's Back Road. The wedding was fixed for 17 February 1961 at Bhilai.

This meant that I would get married while still at the Academy, as our training was to end only in May 1961. The marriage was solemnised as soon as the Bharat Yatra ended. My friends Murli Sinha, Bhagwan and Anwar travelled with the 'baraatis' to Bhilai where the wedding was held.

For me, a more important yatra had just begun, as I entered the Grihastha (householder) phase of my life.

Meanwhile, things were starting to heat up in the Academy, as I prepared to dip my toe in electoral waters once again—only four years after my solemn vow to stay away from the ballot. The Mess Committee at the Academy was an elected body, consisting of a president, a secretary and a few other members who were elected by the probationers from amongst themselves. A few officers in our batch were from the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS), which was later merged with the IAS. The IFAS probationers were senior in age compared to us, having served in other services before.

The first president of the Mess Committee, elected unanimously, was the affable and gentle Major Nag of the IFAS, who was also training with us. The post would fall vacant after the completion of his fixed three-month tenure. Mani had already worked behind the scenes to get himself elected, unopposed, as the next president. Not one to be left behind, I also decided to stake a claim to the post in the election after Mani's term. The office was largely ceremonial but the president was the first

among equals, representing all the probationers at formal functions.

My friends and I formed an alliance that had a clear majority among the probationers but Sovan Kanungo from the Orissa cadre, who also enjoyed wide support, staked his claim to the post. His supporters and mine decided that we would not allow our votes to be split under any circumstances, and the only alternative left was to decide the candidature with the toss of a coin. I lost the toss and Sovan was elected unopposed, while it was also decided that I would be the candidate in the next and final election. However, as the last election rolled around, I was in Patna with Nilima and although SK Lal sent a telegram asking me to return in time for the vote, I chose to ignore it, returning to Mussoorie only after my leave was over.

Suddenly, in the heady days that followed our wedding, the post of president of the Academy's Mess Committee did not seem all that important.

On my return to Charleville I felt rather lonely after all the excitement of the marriage. My roommate Vinod Nair had also proceeded on a few days' leave. The stage was set for some unusual experiences. One dark, rainy night I thought I saw a ghost peeping into my room from one of the windows, through the drizzle outside. It was a woman. Charleville had been a popular hotel before Independence, a favourite with the Europeans. Built in the Gothic style, it exuded an old-world charm.

I have always feared ghosts, especially in the dark. I start imagining them peeping out of the shadows whenever I find myself alone. That night as well, I lay awake, tossing and turning in my bed, convinced that the room was haunted.

I narrated my experience to the bearer when he walked in with my tea the following morning. '*Kya yahan raat ko bhoot aate hain*?' (Do ghosts come here at night?), I asked hesitantly.

Wide-eyed, the man shot back, '*Sahib, toh aapki mulaqaat ho gayi*?' (You have met her then, Sir?)

I shuddered and asked, '*Kya matlab*?' (What do you mean?)

The man went on to tell me the story, with great excitement and much relish at my state of shock, of a European lady who had committed suicide in the room many years ago. Apparently, she now honoured the occupants of the room with an occasional visit in the dead of night.

That clinched it for me. I decided I would no longer sleep in that room alone. Considering that Vinod was going to be away for a few days, I convinced my friends to take turns in giving me company at night. Naturally, the ghost didn't show up again because I never slept in the room alone after that one experience. Still, this was neither my first nor my last encounter with ghosts. They keep bothering me and I continue to fear the supernatural.

Despite this weird encounter, life in the Academy continued along its normal course with our year-long training nearing its end. Parting with friends was painful. We did not know when we would meet again, once we fanned out across the country. Some of us would, perhaps, never see each other again. But such is life.

My wife had already arrived in Mussoorie with her mother and was staying separately. Ironically, we could not live together as the rules made it compulsory for me to stay at the Academy.

PART II

THE IAS YEARS – 1

CHAPTER 5

A LIFE APART

After our training at the Academy and its carefree days, we were posted to our respective states. We had two weeks of secretariat attachment in Patna during which we met all the senior officers from the chief secretary downward. Since there were eight of us, it was not difficult to continue with some of our mischievous ways from our Mussoorie days.

Two things about these interactions are worth mentioning. Most senior officers served us tea and biscuits. Some did not. So, during our meetings, when we heard the rattle of crockery outside, we were assured that refreshments were on the way and exchanged knowing smiles. If not, we tried to keep these meetings as brief as possible telling the 'keen types' to either not ask questions or keep their queries to a minimum.

The second experience was even more interesting. We had called on ICS officer TP Singh (Sr.) at his residence. Singh was the administrator of the Kosi Project, one of the largest engineering projects in the country at the time. As we settled down for our meeting, he suddenly called his son NK Singh, then a student at Delhi University, to join the discussion. NK tried to dominate the conversation, a habit that would stay with him over the years. Some of us were suitably impressed. NK and my paths would cross repeatedly as he would go on to join the IAS a few years later.

After finishing the secretariat attachment in Patna, I returned to Mussoorie to bring Nilima with me to Arrah, headquarters of the Shahabad district in Bihar, to which I had been posted for my district training. My ancestral home, Pandepatti, was a village in the Buxar sub-division of the district. Perhaps, because I had mentioned Patna as my home district, the authorities inadvertently ended up posting me to my *actual* home district, Shahabad. The other seven batchmates were also posted similarly, the Biharis in places other than their home districts.

Adventures in Arrah

Nilima and I travelled to Arrah by train. I had booked first-class berths for us in the Punjab Mail. We were lucky to get a coupé, the privacy of which was welcome. In those days, vestibule trains were not yet in vogue and there were no corridors in the train connecting the various compartments. Each compartment was independent and opened directly onto the platform. There was also no air-conditioning. Yet the journeys used to be enjoyable; this one was particularly so.

We arrived at the Arrah railway station at around 11 p.m. I had sent a telegram to the district collector about my arrival and, naturally, expected to be received at the station by someone from his office but we were in for a rude shock. There was no welcome committee waiting for us at the railway station. I knew that travelling in Arrah was distinctly perilous at night, so I decided not to take the risk of travelling to the Circuit House via unfamiliar roads, choosing the safer option of spending the night in the station's first class waiting room. We reached there, luggage and coolies in tow, only to discover, much to our horror, that it was full of unauthorised travellers, in various stages of undress, sprawled over chairs, tables and even the floor.

Surveying the unwelcome scene, I concluded that it was no place for my new bride, but we were still left with a predicament. Finding two rickshaws to ferry our luggage and us to the Circuit House was not easy, with most rickshaw-wallahs refusing to oblige once we mentioned our destination. After an agonising wait one of them offered to take us, arousing my suspicion about his real intent. He even persuaded another rickshaw-wallah to carry our luggage. While I accepted his offer, I instructed Nilima that in case something untoward happened, she must run back to the station as I tackled the assailants.

Luckily for us, we reached safely along with several pieces of our luggage and assorted marital acquisitions in the other rickshaw. The road had been dark and deserted and, as we later learnt, we had passed through the Maharaja of Dumraon's big mango orchard on the way – a favourite haunt of criminals at night. The once-ominous orchard has now vanished, and the area has been converted into a residential colony.

However, our woes were far from over.

The Circuit House itself was deserted and closed, with absolutely no sign of life. I shouted for the chowkidar, banged on doors and even went to the staff quarters but with no response. Frustrated, I returned to inform my wife that we would have to spend the night sitting on our luggage in the verandah, with a lingering feeling that we were not quite safe. Bad thoughts and unfortunate scenarios jostled for space in my head. The rickshaw-wallahs could come back, I remember thinking, perhaps with accomplices who could be criminals with sinister intentions. Other anti-social elements might take advantage of our plight. As our (bad) luck would have it, it began to drizzle, almost like a dramatic scene out of one of the Bollywood movies that I love so much. An eternity seemed to go by as we sat miserably, trying to avoid getting wet, before I saw some movement in the dark.

Some people were walking towards us, flashing torches. Cautioning my wife to stay quiet, I moved in their direction and shouted, '*Kaun hai*?' Thankfully, they turned out to be policemen on night patrol. Mustering enough courage, I announced that I was the new assistant magistrate of the district and that we were marooned outdoors, at the mercy of the rain and an untraceable chowkidar. The policemen were neither impressed nor inclined to help, striding away and leaving us to our fate. Fatigued after our unwelcome adventure, we tried our best to snatch some much-needed rest, perched uncomfortably on our suitcases, with the rain and a dark night for company.

Come morning, I saw a burly man with a big moustache, chewing on a *datoon* (a teeth-cleaning tree twig) coming our way. Relieved at the sight, I hurried towards him, announcing, 'I am the new assistant magistrate. Can you locate the chowkidar for us?' Even before I could complete my sentence, the big man declared officiously, 'I am the Collector's driver,' and went his merry way. It was only much later that the chowkidar materialised and escorted us to our room.

Our first experience in Arrah was, thus, far from pleasant. My wife was very upset at the reception, or the lack of it, which we had received. Upon further enquiry, I discovered that my telegram had never reached Arrah and had, in fact, arrived a day *after* my arrival. SR Adige, an IAS officer of the 1959 batch, who was also staying at the circuit house, informed us later that he had heard our shouts and door banging that night but had been too scared to open his door for fear of the very same lawlessness for which the area was famous.

Thus began my field career in the IAS. Over the years, I would often recall that night, and the start of my journey as an officer, with a smile, especially when faced with situations far more complex and perilous than what Nilima and I had braved way back then.

We soon regained our cheer and settled down to life at the Circuit House. The

collector, Narbadeshwar Prasad, a special recruit to the IAS, was much older than the other officers of his batch. He had two wives, both sisters. Somehow both marriages had been legalised; yet we found it very odd to deal with a person with two wives, especially since he seemed nonchalant about it while introducing them to us. I suppose he was brave enough to handle two, where most men would secretly confess to the difficulty of tackling even one!

Nilima had a tough time conversing with them, for the two ladies sat on either side of her, both talking at the same time. I found it difficult to suppress a smile as I watched her turn from one to the other to be equally courteous to both. A hard taskmaster, Prasad was often rude to his subordinates, but he was nice to me and made very good arrangements for my training at the Collectorate.

CR Vaidyanathan of the 1953 batch, elder brother of my batchmate CR Venkatraman, was posted at Arrah as the settlement officer. His wife Saroja, who became a famous dancer later, was a very attractive lady. One evening, Vaidyanathan told us a story from his initial years in service when he was posted as sub-divisional officer (SDO) at Sasaram, one of the sub-divisions of the district. He had just got married and also bought a new car. According to him, a common quip in those days was, 'Whenever you see a young man driving a new car, with a new wife, you can be sure that it is the SDO of Sasaram.'

Unable to hold my tongue, I remarked mischievously, 'Well, Sir, you just need to replace your old car with a new one, and people will still say the same thing!'

Saroja had a hearty laugh at the joke but I don't think her husband was equally amused.

BL Das, an officer of the 1958 batch, was the SDO of Buxar and I was attached to him for sub-divisional training. He took me along on his inspection tours, especially when reviewing block offices. He was a thorough professional, and I looked up to him as a role model, picking up many lessons in good administration along the way. He also taught me the art of being firm without being rude—a valuable skill in any officer's repertoire. Another IAS officer posted at Buxar was Abu Hakim of the 1957 batch, who specially looked after agricultural development. The experience must have been valuable for him, for he spent many years in Rome later with the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation. The three of us formed quite a group in Buxar.

Bhabhua was another sub-division of the district where I was sent for sub-treasury training. It was the only sub-treasury in the district that still performed banking functions and dealt with actual cash. Such dealings formed a very important part of an IAS officer's training. Since I had no car, I had to travel for the week-long trip by train, accompanied by my wife. Travelling from Arrah, we changed trains at Mughalsarai to reach Bhabhua. The 'sohan papri' of Buxar was a

famous delicacy and, despite being aware of the poor and unsafe quality of sweets at railway stations, I couldn't resist buying a packet at the Buxar railway station. I remember my father's favourite *halwai* shop also used to be close to the station.

Not only did I buy the sweet, I also ate a lot of it on my way to Bhabhua. Nilima was more careful—something that would serve her well, as it was painfully revealed to me later. On reaching Bhabhua, we were warmly welcomed by the SDO, IN Thakur, who also happened to be a special recruit to the IAS. He graciously invited us for dinner. We checked into the Dak Bungalow but even before we had settled into our room, I was struck by a bout of incessant vomiting that became a cause for great concern. Thakur called for a doctor who diagnosed it as severe food poisoning, rendering me out of commission for a few days despite medication. Clearly, it was not the famous *sohan papri* of Buxar but my carelessness that had caused the trouble.

Pandepatti, our ancestral village, was situated close to Buxar town on the other side of the railway line. I was happy to visit it and meet my relatives who still lived there. Overall, Buxar and Bhabhua turned out to be very interesting. They gave me the much-needed experience and exposure, grounding me for future assignments. For that, I will never be able to repay my debt of gratitude to both BL Das and IN Thakur and, of course, Narbadeshwar Prasad.

Prasad took active interest in my training and offered me the requisite exposure to help groom me for becoming an able and efficient IAS officer. He ensured that I spent time in all the sections of the collectorate, even inviting me to join the interview board set up by him to recruit candidates for a post in the collectorate. During the interview, I came across a candidate who looked very familiar and, since I had taught many students across various classes at Patna University, I had difficulty in placing him. Finally, I asked, 'Were you my student? You look very familiar', to which he angrily retorted, 'No, I was your classmate.'

I ended up apologising humbly for the mistake. Well, the best of memories can fail at times! The lesson I learnt was to never again take a risk by asking a direct question but to indulge in some small talk until I could place the person. This came in very handy during my political career later, even though my guesses were not always right.

Shahabad was a district of the Patna Commissionerate of which SV Sohoni (ICS) was the commissioner. He came on an inspection tour to Arrah and was staying at the Circuit House with his wife, so Nilima and I decided to call on them one evening. We had no prior appointment but, after all, we were staying in the same circuit house and I thought that allowed for a little informality. However, I was shocked to be told that he would not meet us without a prior appointment. He was right, as this is what protocol demanded, but had the tables been turned I

would have readily met a junior officer and his wife. After that incident, I don't remember meeting him socially ever again throughout my IAS career.

Minor hiccups apart, life at Arrah was comfortable and smooth. Being a keen badminton player, I played at the Officers' Club every evening. Arrah also was the headquarters of the Bihar Mounted Military Police. Its Sergeant Major Jha and his wife were also keen badminton players, and our evenings were spent playing strenuous badminton games.

We also played bridge, another favourite game, along with Adige and another player whenever we could manage to rope one in. My wife and I, who played as partners, had bitter fights over each other's mistakes, which often got very noisy. In fact, a visitor even complained to the Collector, alleging that 'women' were being brought to the Circuit House at night. He quoted the loud squabbling between us as evidence, and all of us enjoyed a hearty laugh over this.

Before the completion of the district training, five of us—Murli, Mani, Venkatraman, Ramakant and I—were deputed to conduct a survey of the land being acquired for the Heavy Engineering Corporation plant at Hatia, near Ranchi. Nilima, who was expecting our first child, went back to Delhi to stay with her parents. Her father had been transferred back to Delhi from Bhilai and was posted in the Planning Commission as an advisor.

In Ranchi, we were supposed to report to the divisional commissioner, TC Puri (ICS). Four of us, minus Mani, had arranged to stay together in a government inspection bungalow in Hatia. So, we decided to call on the commissioner together. He lived in an imposing bungalow on Kanke road, which is now the Jharkhand CM's residence. As we waited to meet him, we saw Mani emerging from inside the house. Munching on an apple, he nonchalantly informed us that the commissioner had invited him for breakfast. We were thoroughly demoralised at the discrimination. When we finally met Puri, he told us about the work and his expectations of us. Our survey work at Hatia lasted for about six weeks.

We did our work diligently, going out in the fields every day, measuring the land and recording its quality. We interacted with the tenants who were largely simple tribal folks and made sure that they received the compensation they were entitled to. I couldn't help thinking that this was our first solid contribution to the nation's development.

Following this, we were posted to different districts for survey and settlement

(S&S) training, and I found myself in Shahabad once again. CR Vaidyanathan was still the settlement officer and another IAS officer AKM Hassan was the charge officer or second-in-command. My batchmates Murli and Subarna were also posted in Shahabad, and we were assigned to do the S&S work in the Adhaura hills of Bhabhua sub-division. My headquarters were in Karar, about 17 kilometres from Bhabhua. Murli was further away at the block headquarters, also called Adhaura. In fact, the entire area was known as the 'Adhaura Plateau'. Subarna was even farther away in another part of the hills.

Karar was a small, pretty village surrounded by hills and forests, with the latter being home to wild animals like bears, leopards and tigers. There was an unkempt Inspection Bungalow at Karar where I promptly occupied the better of its two rooms and settled down to a difficult life over the new few months. S&S work consisted of visiting the fields and villages in my area and measuring every inch of land, with a chain as the only measuring instrument at our disposal.

We didn't have any vehicles either, forcing us to move on foot and cover at least ten kilometres a day to be eligible for the daily walking allowance. The *amins* (lowest placed revenue functionaries) were supposed to do the initial work of field measurement and we then had to inspect their work, as assistant settlement officers. My work, in turn, was inspected by my superiors Hassan and Vaidyanathan.

Even though life was tough, we got the much-needed grounding in revenue work, which no other kind of training would have given us. It also familiarised us with conditions at the grassroots level. For their part, the locals enjoyed scaring us. So, when Hassan asked them one day whether there were any wild animals in the forests around Karar, they promptly said that a leopard had been spotted near the Inspection Bungalow the night before. However, I did not come across a single wild animal during my treks in the jungles of Karar.

I had asked my wife to inform me about the arrival of our first child by the fastest means possible: a telegram, which was the only speedy means of communication at the time. As the year 1961 was coming to an end, Murli and I had decided to spend New Year's Eve at his place in Adhaura. But on the morning of December 31, I belatedly received the all-important telegram, conveying the joyous news that we had been blessed with a daughter on 29 December. I dropped all my plans and decided to leave for Delhi immediately. Murli had to be informed about the change in my programme, so I wrote him a letter and dispatched one of my peons to Adhaura to deliver it personally.

With that out of the way, I started the arduous 17-kilometre trek to Bhabhua with Sabhapati Singh, my other peon. Reaching Bhabhua town in the evening, I hired a taxi for the Bhabhua Road railway station, which was still a few miles away from the town, and was lucky to find a berth in a train (probably the Delhi Mail)

that stopped there late at night. The speed of the train was almost frightening, used as I had become to the slower pace of walking in the hills. I hardly slept that night both because of its speed and the excitement of seeing my newborn baby girl. Arriving in Delhi the next morning, on New Year's Day, I went straight to my father-in-law's house at 78, Lodhi Estate, where our daughter Sharmila was born.

Words cannot describe the thrill I felt at seeing my newborn baby. It was a momentous occasion for my parents-in-law as well, for she was their first grandchild. My father-in-law celebrated 'chhatti' in style—a function to mark the arrival of a baby—on the sixth day of her birth, inviting all his colleagues from the ICS. I met some of the senior-most officers in the Government of India (GoI) there, who enquired about my current posting. They were impressed when I told them about my S&S work in remote jungle areas, reminiscing about their own early days in the service.

I stayed in Delhi for a week before returning to Karar and resuming my normal routine, only to discover that my letter cancelling our plans had reached Murli quite late in the day. Apparently, the peon carrying it had spent the afternoon of New Year's Eve perched on top of a tree, evading a bear that had attacked him on the way. It is not as if bears cannot climb trees, but they do so backwards and can be kicked down from above. I could not imagine such an ordeal but when I asked my peon about the incident, he just shrugged carelessly as if nothing had happened. I'm not so sure about the bear.

Back in Bhabhua, IN Thakur had already left and been replaced by another officer as SDO. One day, Murli, Subarna and I went to visit Bhabhua and decided to watch a film together. When the new SDO learnt about our plan, he decided to join us. The management of the cinema hall was duly informed and asked to reserve four seats for us. We suspected that the SDO would not pay for the tickets, and so we hatched a little conspiracy to avoid such a situation. We decided that Subarna and I would keep him engaged while Murli would go and buy the tickets. He did, and we went to our respective seats like VIPs.

Someone must have noticed that we were part of the SDO's group, for the manager walked up to us and asked the SDO apologetically, '*Huzoor*, what crime have we committed that you have bought tickets for the film today?' The SDO was taken aback but we were quick to assure the manager that it did not really matter. Obviously the SDO was far from pleased with our behaviour. In all my subsequent visits to cinema halls in the sub-divisions and districts to which I was posted, paying for film tickets was always a struggle. It was only when I threatened not to watch the film that the management would finally relent and let me pay for them.

As I was to discover later, being in a position of power makes people keen to oblige you in numerous ways, only for them to use that as leverage in the future. If

you want to be straight and honest, you must negotiate this minefield very carefully, watching each step.

Our S&S training was cut short due to the impending general elections in early 1962. We were posted back to our respective districts, and I returned to Arrah. This time, instead of staying at the Circuit House, I rented a house in a locality called Maulabagh. I also brought my family to stay with me. We lived in this house, in semi-primitive conditions, for a few months until I was posted to a sub-division. There was no running water and the toilet was a hole in the floor that had to be manually cleaned. It was quite a shock for my wife who had never lived in such conditions before. Looking after little Sharmila also kept us busy. Otherwise, as I have noted earlier, we had an active social life and enjoyed running our first independent household.

In May 1962, I received my posting orders as sub-divisional officer of the Giridih sub-division in the Hazaribagh district of Chhota Nagpur division. I was quite happy at the move, as Giridih was the hub of the mica trade, a flourishing township and a very important sub-divisional charge in those days. I was told that Mani, who was under training at Hazaribagh, had wanted to go to Giridih but this time his influence had not worked. He was posted to Jehanabad in Gaya district, instead, while Murli was sent to Samastipur, another important sub-divisional charge.

We packed our bags and sent our stuff in a truck to Giridih, accompanied by a peon. When the peon returned, he looked rather disappointed as he felt that Giridih was too far away. He had to cross many mountains and jungles to reach there. He was not alone in his disappointment. It was the general feeling in the rest of Bihar that Chhota Nagpur was situated in the back of beyond.

In preparation for the sub-divisional charge, I bought a second hand car. It was a Standard Super 10 model, in a decent condition. It looked unique because of its two-tone colour, cream and light green. We travelled in it to Giridih. My predecessor, Patankar, an IAS officer of the 1958 batch, had already left, and we had no problem settling down in our new house. It was a large colonial building with an airy verandah in front along with a big garden, many rooms and a courtyard. I used one of the rooms as my home office, though my official one was only a stone's throw away. We were delighted with our accommodation and, for the first time, felt truly well settled.

How was I to know, then, that my destiny would be irrevocably entwined with

the area now known as Jharkhand, in general, and the district of Hazaribagh, in particular?

CHAPTER 6

A COLLAGE OF MEMORIES

Giridih

Giridih was one of the largest sub-divisions of Bihar and one of the earliest to be upgraded to a district. It consisted of twelve blocks, some completely agricultural while others were largely industrial. There were many large coal-mines in Giridih itself and in the Bermo block. It also had two thermal power plants, at Bokaro (not where the steel plant is) and Dugda, as well as several coal washeries. It enjoyed a vast forest cover, especially around the Parasnath hills, with two divisional forest officers posted at Giridih. In the holy mountain range of Parasnath, the peaks are named after the Jain Tirthankaras with a huge Jain pilgrimage centre, Madhuban, nestled in the foothills. This is not to be confused with Madhubani in North Bihar, famous for its folk paintings.

The highest peak of the Parasnath Hills is about 4,500 feet high. During my stint there, I trekked to the top several times. I also decided to hold the monthly meeting of my BDOs at the mountain top once. There was a Dak Bungalow there where such a meeting could be held. The BDOs had no choice but to climb all the way to the top, which they did, huffing and puffing. A few were particularly challenged by the sudden exercise and took a long time to reach, I remember. At that meeting, I emphasised the need to be physically fit for a field job, among other things, a deeply-ingrained habit that has helped me through gruelling schedules over the years.

Thanks to Giridih being a centre of the mica trade, several families there from all over India had amassed considerable wealth. The Beniadih colliery, on the outskirts of the town, boasted a sophisticated club with outdoor tennis and indoor badminton courts, as well as a swimming pool—a rare luxury. It also had a bar that only served Scotch whiskey. The SDO enjoyed the privilege of being an ex-officio

member.

To keep us company, there was Dr. Ansari, a paediatrician who had studied in the US and had an American wife, Patricia; and an Anglo-Indian couple, Gabriel and Maxwell Pearce. Maxi, as he was fondly called, was a mica inspector, responsible for checking the quality of the mica exported, on behalf of the importers abroad. It was a private commercial arrangement and Maxi was a much-sought-after person. In those days, Chand Mal Rajgariah was considered the king of the mica trade. He had a large family and owned a huge mansion in Giridih. DK Reddy was another mica trader and a thorough gentleman. Fortunately for us, we had excellent company in Giridih.

Because of the mica trade, Giridih had emerged as quite a cosmopolitan place and the erstwhile British Beniadih Club was an added attraction. As a result, we had an active social life. I also had a large support staff—a Second Officer who was a senior Bihar Civil Service officer and my second-in-command—and several magistrates and revenue officers. The technical departments also had senior, district-level officers based in Giridih, with the SDO as the chief executive. Giridih had a tradition of directly recruited IAS officers manning the sub-division.

An interesting part of the SDO's responsibility was to hold court to dispose of both revenue and criminal cases. Two days in the week were set aside for '*sawaal khani' work* (where people could directly lodge their complaints with the SDO). The SDO sat in the '*ijlas*' (session), a raised court platform, and heard these complaints. He then disposed of them either by taking cognisance under the various sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) or sent them for further enquiry to the police or a magistrate. The SDO could also exercise his jurisdiction under Sections 144 and 145 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), related to land disputes; and Sections 107, 109 and 110 for maintenance of peace and good behaviour. Bail matters were also heard by the SDO.

It was only later that much of the judicial work was taken away from executive magistrates and assigned to judicial magistrates. It was here that I realised the importance of everything that Anjani Kumar Sinha, our law teacher, had taught us at the Academy.

Touring the sub-division constituted an important part of my responsibilities as an SDO, and necessitated spending a certain number of nights outside the headquarters. I was fortunate in this regard, as Giridih had very good inspection bungalows belonging to the District Board, the Public Works Department (PWD), the Forest Department and even the public sector units (PSUs) operating in the sub-division. Some were situated in beautiful locations of great scenic beauty. I enjoyed travelling, and often spent more nights outside than was mandatory.

It was on one of these tours that our daughter, Sharmila, who was then a

toddler, met with an accident. My wife had started teaching her how to count. So, she would say 'one, two, three' and then prompt her to jump. My wife would often stand below the low verandah and catch her in her arms as she jumped down from it. Once when we were staying at an Inspection Bungalow at Nawadih, a block headquarters, Sharmila stood on the edge of the verandah and shouted, 'One, two, three!' and jumped. Unfortunately, there was no loving mother there to catch her from the verandah's very high plinth and she crash-landed, hard, on the ground. We came running on hearing her cries, only to find our little girl lying on the ground, hurt and extremely shaken. Fortunately, no bones were broken. Years later, we still tease her about it.

On another occasion, when I was facing a tricky situation, the *gyan* (wisdom) to solve the problem came to me at another rest house. This is what happened. My Second Officer, Jaidev Prasad, was an elderly gentleman with snow-white hair. He was a good worker but, once, he put me in a real spot when he requested permission to take the official jeep of the sub-division on a private trip to his hometown in north Bihar. It was clearly a very irregular thing to do, so I ignored his request for a few days, but he was very persistent, even as I struggled with saying 'no' to his face.

One day, I was out on tour and staying at the Forest Rest House in a place called Isri, with a magnificent view of the Parasnath Hills from my room. Suddenly, I was struck by divine inspiration in the serenity of my surroundings. I immediately wrote a letter to Jaidev stating that his taking the official jeep on a private trip would be wrong and a major embarrassment for us all, adding that I was unable to accede to his request.

Not only did I feel at peace after sending the letter, it turned out to be an important epiphany that helped guide some of my decisions in the future. Since then, I have consistently followed the principle that it is better to incur a minor embarrassment today than to have a major one tomorrow, as I learnt to say 'no' firmly yet politely. Jaidev also realised his folly and made plans to travel privately rather than use an official vehicle.

This was only one of many incidents that marked my stint at Giridih, as I was often faced with difficult choices in my official capacity. There was one where, I must admit, I acted quite rashly. I was checking motor vehicles near Bermo for violations of law when the executive engineer, PWD, of Giridih, along with the superintending engineer and the chief engineer from Patna, happened to pass through that area. They were in the executive engineer's car, which was duly stopped for inspection. There were some discrepancies in the car's papers. When the inspecting staff reported this to me, I refused to show them any special consideration and asked them to appear before me in the camp court. They had no

choice but to comply. I was quite stern and even imposed a fine on them. The incident created quite a stir, not only in Giridih but the entire state.

Another incident is also worth mentioning. One day, a villager came to my court during 'sawaal khani' to file a complaint. This was his story: His wife had gone to the forest to collect wood, where she was arrested, since cutting trees was an illegal act, taken to the police station and raped by the policemen. He had been away from the village and was informed of the incident by her upon his return. Disturbed by the news and confused about his course of action, he went to the village well for a bath. Returning home, he found that his wife had hanged herself to death.

Since he did not trust the police, he approached me to seek justice. I was very shocked to hear the poor villager's story and ordered a magisterial enquiry against the policemen, including the officer-in-charge of the police station. DN Sahay, an IPS officer of my batch, was posted as assistant superintendent of police (ASP) in Giridih. We were on very friendly terms, but Dinesh took exception to my decision, telling me that the case was false. The magisterial enquiry was held, and, to my utter shock and disbelief, the complaint turned out to be completely baseless. The wife had indeed committed suicide but for an entirely different reason. The husband was not nice to her and some villagers, unhappy with the local officer in-charge, had persuaded him to lodge a false complaint implicating the policemen.

I learnt many valuable lessons from this incident—not to take anything at face value, not to rush to instant conclusions, and the importance of verifying before trusting.

Giridih was also a communally sensitive place and any incident of a communal nature called for urgent and immediate action. Something like this happened one evening. I was playing tennis in the Beniadih Club when I received a phone call from an alarmed citizen whom I knew personally, saying that a communal riot had broken out in a village on the outskirts of the town. I immediately left the club, informing the local police station on the way to send a response force, picked up my jeep from home and proceeded to the village with my peon.

On the way, I found two policemen in uniform strolling on the road and commandeered them to join me. The four of us drove to the village, only to realise that we could not take the jeep to the village, as there was no road, forcing us to leave it behind and walk to the village. By then, it was quite dark and shouts of 'Jai Bajrang Bali' and 'Allah hu Akbar' rent the air.

I told my peon, a tall, burly fellow, to run toward the village shouting that the SDO had arrived. Fortunately, no violence had taken place until then but people from both sides had been mobilised, weapons collected, and slogans were being raised. The air was thick with tension and it seemed that the mob could turn violent

at any moment. We arrived in the Hindu area first. The Hindus complained that the Muslims were gearing up for an attack on them and that whatever they were doing was only in self-defence. I told them sternly that nothing would happen to them, as I had arrived, and made them sit in neat rows to await further instructions.

I then proceeded to the Muslim *mohalla* (neighbourhood) where I was told the same story of self-defence. I made them sit quietly as well, and waited for the police force to arrive, but in vain. There was no sign of it. After having waited for almost an hour during which the crowd had started to get restive, I saw a state transport bus stop near my jeep, from which emerged a police team. I then asked the police officer to arrest all the able-bodied men from both sides and 'challan' them—inform the court and send them to jail.

I later learnt that the reason for the police's late arrival was because they had decided to have a leisurely dinner before 'rushing to the spot' in a state transport bus which they had commandeered for their use. Their tardiness left me wondering what might have happened had violence eventually broken out or had I not reached the village in time. Surely, many lives would have been lost.

For me, the incident is reminiscent of the respect senior civil administration officials used to command in those days. Sadly, most of it has been lost today, with district magistrates being attacked, and even killed, in some instances. Support of senior officers and the freedom they gave me contributed greatly to my confidence in dealing with law and order situations and crises, in particular, and other problems, in general. I was particularly lucky in this regard. Able and unstinted support from all echelons is important for administrators to do their job well, and freely.

My deputy commissioner, SN Chakravarty, was a fine gentleman, who gave me a free hand and did not interfere with my work. VP Kashyap, who became the DC of Hazaribagh after him was even better in this regard. This also came in handy while dealing with politicians.

KB Sahay—a powerful politician from Hazaribagh—had just become a minister in the Bihar government once again. He was reputed to be a stern taskmaster, though he had lost some of his clout following his defeat in the assembly elections earlier. He contested again, won and was re-appointed as a minister. He was visiting Bermo at the invitation of Bindeswari Dubey, a prominent labour leader of the coal mine workers. Dubey later went on to become the chief minister of Bihar as did

KB Sahay before him.

The context of Sahay's visit was that following the Chinese invasion of India in 1962, prime minister Nehru had set up the Defence of India Fund with an appeal to the people of India to contribute generously. Sub-divisions and districts were competing to collect as much as they could toward the same. My wife gladly donated some of her gold jewellery while I gave up my gold buttons and cuff links, a marriage gift, for the fund. In the coalfields, the workers and officers also decided to donate a day's salary, and a substantial amount of a few lakh rupees was collected. Dubey had invited Sahay to come and receive the amount in person. Deputy commissioner Chakravarty asked me to receive the minister, as he was busy elsewhere.

I waited outside the venue of the meeting in my car. On learning of my arrival Dubey came to my car and requested me to come inside and take my seat, to which I replied rather tersely, 'You have not invited me. So, I shall wait for the minister here.' Dubey did not insist and left. When the minister arrived, I received him and accompanied him inside the hall. There were only three chairs on the dais: one for the minister, one for Dubey and the third for the area general manager of the public sector coal company, NCDC, which is now called Coal India. KSR Chari was the area GM who later went on to become the coal secretary to the Government of India.

I occupied a seat in the front row, sitting among the audience. After the usual speeches, the collected money was presented to the minister in a bag, who asked me to step up and take charge of it. My reply was that the money had been presented to him and he should keep it, a response that took him by surprise. He looked around and asked Dubey to vacate his chair, inviting me to join him on the dais. Handing over the money, he said that the money belonged to me rather than to him and even invited me to make a speech. For my part, I advised people to exercise caution while donating their money and ensure that it was going to the right quarters. I then saw the minister off and left the venue with a sense of satisfaction, as the money was a welcome addition to my sub-division's account.

Several VIPs visited Giridih while I was posted there and my time there was rich with various interesting experiences. I shall mention a few here.

One of them was the visit of the then commerce minister, Manubhai Shah. Chand Mal Rajgariah had invited him to look at the state of the mica trade. I only had protocol duties to perform. As we saw him off, Rajgariah said politely, 'Sir, you could have stayed a bit longer.' To this Shah bluntly replied, 'Why, is Giridih "swarg" (heaven)?' I felt that the sarcasm of the remark was uncalled for and rude, to say the least. I learnt later that Shah was known for such thoughtless remarks.

JK Galbraith, the celebrated US ambassador to India, also paid a visit to the

Chandrapura thermal power plant in the Bermo block. Many senior officers had come from Patna for his visit. Here again, I was only concerned with protocol duties, but I do remember the tall, impressive gentleman very well. It was a hot and sultry afternoon when he arrived for lunch at the guesthouse, and I recall him guzzling a few glasses of beer to cool off.

Another visitor was the senior IAS officer, PKJ Menon, who later became the chief secretary of Bihar. Menon had served in the British Indian Army earlier and had also been a prisoner of war (POW) of the Japanese. The story doing the rounds was that he had once tried to escape from the POW camp but was caught, along with some fellow prisoners, and narrowly escaped being shot to death. He had a stern countenance and looked every bit the tough officer he was reputed to be. He was also a stickler for cleanliness and I had heard that he would even climb a table or chair to check the surface of ceiling fans for dust. Having been cautioned beforehand, I had taken all necessary precautions for his visit and it passed off without incident.

TC Puri, commissioner of the Ranchi Division, also came to inspect Gawan, a distant block in my sub-division. He was fond of 'shikaar' (hunting), though there was not much game left in the area. He inspected the block and was quite impressed by the show put up by the BDO, much to my relief, especially since I knew the BDO to be quite incompetent. But then inspection of the block was only an excuse; the important business seemed to be the hunting.

Giridih will always be special in my memory because it was in the middle of my tenure here, in April 1963, to be precise, that our son Jayant was born. Like Nilima's first delivery, this also took place at home and not the hospital. The arrival of a son in the family was an occasion for celebration, and my mother's presence was a major help to my wife. With the arrival of a new baby, my daughter Sharmila started crying more often, especially at night. I used to bestow all my attention on her but to little avail. We spent many sleepless nights because of this.

However, Sharmila was very fond of baby Jayant and enjoyed playing with him. The staff called him 'babu' and, not being able to pronounce the word properly, she started calling him 'Paapu', a nickname that everyone soon picked up. Unfortunately, it is not a very complimentary name nowadays!

I spent twenty-six months in Giridih before being transferred to Patna as under secretary in the finance department. I am proud to say that by then, through sheer hard work, I had established a reputation for being a tough, fair and efficient officer.

CHAPTER 7

BACK TO PATNA

My transfer to Patna happened in the normal course of things. By then, my other batchmates had also congregated in Patna in various positions. Murli was under secretary in the appointments department, a prized posting as it dealt with personnel and their transfers and postings. Mani had joined the department of industry.

I got my senior scale in the IAS while in the finance department and was promoted as deputy secretary within a year. The CM, KB Sahay, had kept the finance portfolio for himself, with a powerful politician—Ambika Sharan Singh—as his minister of state (MoS), who was the finance minister for all practical purposes.

In Finance, we generally dealt with the expenditure proposals of other departments. Early during my stint there, I remember how we received a proposal from the animal husbandry department to set up a chicken dressing plant in a poultry farm near Patna. This was summarily rejected by my under secretary, a direct-recruit IAS officer. When I asked him about what a plant like this was all about, I was surprised to learn that he had no idea. I could not believe he had rejected the proposal without even understanding it, a decision that I overturned after a discussion with the director of animal husbandry who explained to both of us what it was all about.

This is but one illustration of how negativity can often overtake the functioning of even the best of us, especially in a department like finance. I could not have predicted the future then, but I did learn two important lessons: that irrespective of the post you hold, a constructive approach is always the best; and that you are not the repository of all wisdom only because you happen to occupy an important post.

On the official side, my life was proceeding smoothly but I was constantly on a roller-coaster ride at home. At the beginning of our stay in Patna we had a very tiny flat, two small kids and no domestic help whatsoever. My wife was also expecting our third child. After our large, sprawling house in Giridih, it was

difficult to make do with this hostel-like accommodation, built on Birchand Patel Marg. Jayant was just a toddler and kept poor health, even suffering a severe bout of dysentery. I kept busy with office work and life for Nilima was, indeed, quite difficult.

Thankfully, after a few months, we were allotted a flat on Bailey Road near Raj Bhawan. This was also small, with only two bedrooms but that was the extent of my entitlement at the time. I was happy to get the accommodation but had to get an electric meter installed, personally and in my name, for which I approached the general manager of the Patna Electric Supply Undertaking, only to discover the 'Law of Diminishing Courtesy'. The GM treated me well, offered me a seat and a cup of tea and sent his personal peon to help me complete the formalities quickly. The next officer was courteous, offered me a chair and signed the papers without delay.

My next stop was the head clerk's table who did not even ask me to sit, despite a vacant chair facing his table. The last and the final stage was the worst of all. The clerk took his own time to look at the papers despite knowing that I was someone important, having been sent by the GM himself. He refused to sign the papers and made we wait unnecessarily, even as he kept me standing the entire time. It is not my theory that courtesy diminishes only when you go down the line. The reverse is often also true.

The four of us might have managed to live well in our small flat had it not been for the arrival of my parents, two younger sisters and the eldest brother, who suffered from epilepsy and stayed with my parents. They all suddenly came to live with us. Adding to the pressure on our living space, my parents also invited my brother Bijay's family—his wife and three children—to stay with us. Bijay had gone to the US for six months of training. The flat became impossibly overcrowded and my wife was certainly not pleased. We retained a room for the children and us but there was utter chaos in the rest of the house.

Nilima must have complained to her mother in Delhi because my mother-in-law, quite alarmed at the news, also descended upon Patna. She visited her daughter immediately and took our two children to her brother's house where she was staying, all before I returned home from office. To add to this already volatile mix, my father-in-law wrote a letter to Babuji, objecting to our overcrowded home, which he feared would lead to a dip in our standard of living. We would have no social life, which was bound to affect my career, he wrote, adding that the situation would also adversely impact our children's health.

My wife had probably not bargained for all of this when she wrote to her mother. For my part, I did not like it and angrily told Nilima that I would have nothing to do with her parents in future. I also insisted on getting our kids back and

warning her mother not to interfere in our lives. Babuji, too, wrote a very stern letter to my father-in-law. At last, in light of our fierce resistance, my mother-in-law had no option but to return to Delhi without the children, leaving her daughter to her fate.

The incident is indicative of the stresses and strains that result from the differences in a couple's socio-cultural backgrounds, due to which conflicts of this kind could, and did, take place. Nilima, no doubt, was most accommodating but, in the given circumstances, even her patience had worn off. I have always regretted the fact that I did not give her the sympathy and support that she must have needed at a time like that.

My brother came back from the US after a few months and took his family back with him. Personally, I was happy not to have let Bijay down in his hour of need, by helping his family while he was away. It was a small measure of my gratitude for all that he had done for me. My parents stayed on with us and life returned to near normal.

My friend Jagannathan Murli also stayed in a flat nearby. He had a daughter, Radhika, about the same age as our children and they would all play together. We usually spent the evenings either in our house or his, which came as a huge relief for Nilima, who got on well with Murli's wife Hema. Hema and Murli were simple folks despite their impressive backgrounds, and outstanding achievements. Hema had a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in the US and her father CV Narasimhan (ICS) was the Under Secretary-General of the United Nations, the highest-ranking Indian in the UN system in those days.

Murli's father, Jagannathan, was the finance secretary to the Government of India. Yet they were a most unassuming couple who did not put on any airs or graces. I felt comfortable in their company, and our close friendship continues to endure. On the contrary, I did not meet Mani very often, even though he too was posted in Patna. I think he was a little upset because Murli and I had become close friends. Being back in Patna also allowed me to touch base with my old school friends like Bhagwan, Raman, Keshav, Shambhu and others.

It was during our stay in Patna that another momentous and joyful event took place in our lives, when we were blessed with our third child. Nilima went back to Delhi to be under her parents' care for the delivery, again at home. By now my father-in-law had become secretary in the mines and minerals ministry and was living at 34, Prithviraj Road, where Sumant was born. With his birth, I felt that our family was complete. I remember I was visiting Giridih where I received the good news of his birth. I returned to Patna by car and later went to Delhi to happily fetch my family back home to Patna.

At work, I was enjoying my tenure in the finance department of the

Government of Bihar. Being a part of the state's administrative machinery threw up immense learning opportunities as well as tough challenges, in equal measure, and I was soaking up new and interesting experiences that continued to come my way.

Even in those days, states could raise market loans every year to augment their resources, a task that fell under my charge in the finance department. So, I soon found myself travelling to Bombay (now Mumbai) for meetings with heads of financial institutions (FIs) to raise the loan. I took a flight from Patna to Kolkata and then onward to Mumbai and remember it well, especially because I was thrilled to catch a glimpse of the famous Bollywood actor Shammi Kapoor in the plane. Travelling by plane was rare then. That, and the sight of the famous actor, made it quite a journey for me. As I have already noted, I have always been a great film buff.

Raising a loan was easy as all the public sector FIs and banks had already been assigned their quotas by the Government of India. But I met them all the same, including BD Pande, an ICS officer of the Bihar cadre who was chairman of the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India.

Little did I know that, one day, I would be dealing with these institutions as the country's finance minister.

The loan was raised without any hiccups and I was congratulated on the success not only by my superior officers but also the MoS finance, Ambika Sharan Singh, as well as the redoubtable chief minister KB Sahay. Sahay's compliment meant a lot to me, and not just on this occasion. He had been a student of English literature in college and was the topper of his batch. He was reputed to be a tough administrator and was also very particular about the correct use of the English language in notes recorded on government files, often commenting on mistakes made by officials.

One day, after the successful raising of the loan, the liveried peon of the CM came to my room and informed me that the CM had sent his 'salaam'. It was quite unusual for the CM to summon a junior officer like me. Naturally, I became rather nervous. I was sure that the CM had found some linguistic error in one of my file notings and wanted to admonish me.

I entered his room with a great deal of trepidation. To my utter surprise, instead of admonishing me, he asked in a loud voice, 'Would you like to go to Dumka as

deputy commissioner?' I replied hesitantly, 'Sir, I am a government servant. I shall obey government orders.' If his initial question sounded somewhat belligerent, the follow-up was clearly hostile. He almost shouted at me, 'No, no. I want to know your mind', to which I quickly replied, 'Yes sir. I would.' This is how the CM gave me the major gift of a district posting.

In the next Cabinet meeting, my posting as deputy commissioner of the Santhal Parganas was approved. In October 1965, after over a year's stay at Patna, where I had my first brush with the finance portfolio, I left for Dumka. Ambika Sharan Singh obviously had a hand in persuading the chief minister to post me to Dumka and, since I was the first from my batch to be posted to a district, the appointment did raise some eyebrows.

Dumka was the headquarters of the Santhal Parganas district, the largest in Bihar then, with 44 blocks and six sub-divisions. All its sub-divisions are districts today. My wife and parents were very happy at this news as it meant, among other things, living in an independent and spacious house once again, and with a large staff.

CHAPTER 8

DUMKA DAYS

Dumka did not have any train connectivity so I decided to drive down there. As usual, I drove myself, accompanied by only one peon. It was a six or seven hours' drive from Patna. On the way was the sub-divisional town of Deoghar, a famous pilgrimage centre with an ancient Shiva temple.

Legend has it that Ravana – the greatest *bhakta* (devotee) of Shiva – had undertaken an almost impossible penance to please the Lord who, being pleased by his devotion, had offered to grant him his one wish. Ravana wanted to carry Him to Lanka to which the Lord could not say no. So, Ravana was carrying Shiva from Mount Kailash to Lanka when he had to stop urgently to answer the call of nature.

All this was contrived by the Lord himself to prevent Ravana from carrying him to Lanka. The understanding between the two was that Ravana would not put him on the ground throughout the journey and, if he did so, all bets would be off, and the Lord would return to Kailash. Ravana violated this condition at Deoghar.

A temple was erected there to mark this event and house the Shiva Linga (phallic sign or symbol of Shiva) left behind by Ravana, making Deoghar a place of great religious significance and one of the twelve Jyotirlingas in the country.

Most people would have stopped at Deoghar to pay obeisance to Lord Shiva and seek his blessings, especially before starting a new innings. However, I was not much into religion at the time and the thought did not even cross my mind. I drove past the town and arrived at the Dumka circuit house in the evening. The Collectorate had been informed about my arrival but nobody there had perhaps seen me before or even recognised me.

So, as I got out of the car after parking it on the porch of the circuit house, and climbed up the steps to the verandah, someone asked me rather sternly who I was. Obviously, they did not want the new DC's reception to be spoilt by an unwelcome visitor who had the temerity to park his car on the porch. Upon announcing that my name was Yashwant Sinha, I bemusedly watched the flurry of activity that followed. One person ran to the car to fetch my luggage, another to my room to

make sure that everything was in order, while someone else ran to bring me tea. I simply went to my room and settled down for some rest, assuming charge of the district the following day.

The Santhal Parganas occupied a very special place among the districts of Bihar. It was very large and mainly tribal, named after the third-largest tribe in India. The only means of communication was by road and though it was a favourite of ICS officers during the British days, somehow, after Independence, most of the deputy commissioners happened to be officers promoted from the state civil service. I was perhaps the first directly-recruited IAS officer posted there in a long time. At twenty-eight, I was also the youngest district magistrate in the entire state.

In fact, people often found it difficult to believe that they were face-to-face with the deputy commissioner, perhaps because I looked too young for the post. Once, a visitor from Calcutta came to meet me at my home office. I was sitting on the table rather informally and not behind it on my office chair. Upon seeing me, he asked casually, 'Where is the deputy commissioner, please?' Suppressing a smile, I replied, 'Well, you are speaking to him.' I must say I quite enjoyed watching his shocked expression.

My youthful age changed a few other equations, as well.

There were two police districts in Santhal Parganas. The superintendent of police (SP) at Dumka, Fazal Ahmed, had earlier been the senior superintendent of police (SSP) of Patna, and Dumka was like a demotion for him. The other SP, based in Sahebganj, was Ashok Jang Bahadur, who had participated with me in the Nalanda Inter-University Debating Competition during our college days. Ashok had already joined the IPS in 1959 while I was appearing for my IAS exams. He had told me that if I succeeded, I should send him a one-word telegram saying 'Boss'. When the time came, I did indeed send that telegram.

Interestingly, according to the rules in those days, the DC had the power to inspect police stations and comment on the tour diary of the SP. Little had Ashok and I imagined that things would turn out quite this way.

Once I had moved to my sprawling bungalow, I was joined by my wife and parents. The large compound of the bungalow had no wall, not even a fence. Only trees and bushes set its limits, and its main gate was always open. The authority of the DC was considered as barrier enough. We did not have an armed guard at our house either. The building was built in the colonial style, just like Patna College. It had a huge drawing room and an equally large dining room located in the middle, surrounded by five bedrooms. One of these rooms had a wooden floor and was very large, having obviously been a dance floor in the British days.

On one side of the bungalow was my home office, where I spent a considerable

amount of time doing my homework. Here I was often interrupted by Sumant, who had just learned to walk and kept toddling in and out of the room nonchalantly, often clad only in nappies or his birthday suit, and unruffled by the constant stream of visitors. His waddling visits were a welcome break in an otherwise dull routine.

The Santhal Parganas had its own tenancy law to protect the rights and interests of the tribal population. This was materially different from the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act, applicable in the other tribal districts; and from the Bihar Tenancy Act, which prevailed in the rest of Bihar. I had to hold regular court to hear cases under it. I enjoyed the powers of a district judge under the Act with appeals against my orders lying only with the High Court, a privilege enjoyed only by the DC of Santhal Parganas. The district also had more additional collectors than the other districts in Bihar. Three of my SDOs were directly-recruited IAS officers and the other three were from the State Civil Service.

The district had another unique feature. Within it, there was a separately demarcated part known as the Damin Area. It was a very special area reserved for the tribal population, full of forests and often difficult to penetrate. Tribal customs and institutions were fully protected there and often prevailed over the laws applicable in other parts of the state/country. The British had built several bungalows in this area known as Damin Bungalows, many of which were in a dilapidated condition for want of proper maintenance. I got several of them repaired and furnished and enjoyed staying in some of the loveliest and remotest areas of the district.

The Santhal Parganas is also home to the Paharia tribe, a small, self-sufficient community that was confined to the hills and rarely emerged from there. Until recently, they believed in *jhum* (shifting) cultivation. I once climbed a hill to meet this remote community, only to be surprised when their chief introduced me to his people as a 'representative of the Company Bahadur'. Such was their isolation and self-reliance that nineteen years after Independence—and more than a century after the end of the British East India Company's rule – they still believed that India was ruled by the Company!

Life would have been smooth sailing in the district had it not been for the terrible drought that struck Bihar in 1966-67. The rains had failed, and all the districts were badly hit. The Santhal Parganas, especially, suffered a major setback. The state government launched several emergency measures to combat the impact of the

drought, including running free kitchens for the poor.

The Bihar Relief Committee, headed by Jaiprakash Narayan (or JP, as he is more fondly and popularly known), ran relief camps that served free food. The relief work posed a huge challenge for the state administration and I was burning the candle at both ends to ensure that it was executed properly and honestly, also making many surprise visits.

During one such visit, I travelled through the night by car from Jamtara, a sub-divisional town, to Sahebganj, another sub-divisional headquarter at the other end of the district. Reaching there by morning, I tried to locate the village level worker (VLW) entrusted with the task of relief work, such as getting *kuccha* (unbricked) wells dug by the farmers. The poor chap, who had just woken up and was brushing his teeth with a *datoon*, cut a sorry figure, least expecting the DC himself to descend upon him at the crack of dawn. I asked for his daily diary and was shocked to find that it hardly contained any official information. All it showed were personal details like waking up in the morning, singing 'bhagwat bhajans', having breakfast and so on. I had no choice but to suspend him on the spot.

My diligence in carrying out famine relief work was greatly appreciated by my superiors, especially the commissioner of the division, VP Kashyap. He had been my deputy commissioner in Hazaribagh when I was SDO, Giridih, and was familiar with my capacity for hard work. I felt the results were, in large part, achieved by my extensive touring of the district in those difficult days.

The districts have become smaller now. I have already noted that the old district of Santhal Parganas has now been split into six different districts. But even in the smaller ones, I regret to note, district officers are not touring as much as we used to in our time. I wonder if they ever spend a night outside their headquarters. Things must change, but for the better and not worse.

I had been out of my headquarters on tour for nearly five days at a stretch when I received word that the CM of Bihar, Mahamaya Prasad Sinha, would be visiting my district. There had been a change of government in Bihar, as in some other states, after the assembly elections of 1967. For the first time, the ruling Congress party had lost the elections in some of the states and given way to coalition governments. In Bihar, the new formation consisted of parties that had earlier been in the Opposition, where most of the ministers had spent their entire political careers.

It was a motley combination of disparate elements, with the ministers having their own scores to settle with the officials and their political rivals alike. Newspapers were rife with stories about various humiliations heaped by these new ministers upon the officials in the secretariat and in the field. The entire civil service was demoralised, as it was an unequal fight where the officials had no

option but to swallow the insults and humiliation.

The looming possibility of being at the receiving end of this kind of behaviour often bothered me. Little did I know that the impending visit of Mahamaya Prasad Sinha would prove to be the great disruption in my seemingly settled life, eventually playing a central role in my destiny.

I returned to the district headquarters to receive the CM, who was coming to inaugurate a floating pump, an innovative technology for those days, at the Massanjore reservoir. This would enable us to use the reservoir's water for irrigation even when the water level was down. The Hungarian ambassador, whose government had gifted the pump, was supposed to hand it over to the chief minister at Massanjore in a formal ceremony. The CM was accompanied by the state's irrigation minister Chandrashekhar Singh and senior government officials.

I received the guests at the airstrip and we all drove to the Dumka Circuit House where a crowd, comprising of the very same people who used to turn up during Congress ministers' visits, was waiting for them. After being invited into the drawing room by the CM, they kicked off with their usual complaints against the local administration. The CM told them, 'It is time for me to leave for the function at Massanjore but please stay back and I will listen to you patiently upon my return.'

After the inauguration of the pump, we returned to the Circuit House where those people were still waiting. They were again invited into the drawing room by the CM, where he and the irrigation minister proceeded to occupy the two available chairs. I remained standing until my officers brought a chair for me. The crowd was very restless and impatient as people had waited for over two hours. This time the complaints were louder and uglier. After each one was voiced, the CM would turn to me and demand an explanation, and the meeting soon turned into an inquisition.

I tried to explain my position to the CM as patiently and politely as I could, but the irrigation minister, who belonged to the Communist Part of India (CPI), became increasingly aggressive. At one point, he suddenly asked me about the formation of an all-party committee at the district level that the new government had wanted to set up to supervise the drought relief work.

I told him that we had not received the names of representatives from some political parties including his, when I had left on my extended tour of the district, and that I would check the latest position from the additional collector concerned and let him know. He flared up at this reply and shouted, in front of the entire crowd, that I did not deserve to be the deputy commissioner if I did not have such information at my fingertips. His unnecessary rudeness truly unsettled me. My patience snapped, and I looked at the CM and said, quite firmly, 'Sir, I would not like to be treated in this manner.'

Sensing the ugly turn the situation seemed to be taking, the CM decided to end the meeting immediately. He addressed the crowd, saying, '*Aap mere jigar ke tukde hain. Koi bhi samasya ho toh mujhe Patna mein aa kar miliye*.' (You all are very close to my heart and should come to Patna if you face any problem). This brought a swift end to the proceedings in the drawing room, but my ordeal was far from over.

We moved to an adjoining room where tea had been served and were joined by the local SP and the DIG (Range), who had come from Bhagalpur, as well as the civil surgeon. While we were having tea, the CM turned around and reprimanded me, 'You should not have behaved in this manner.'

I was flabbergasted, and replied, 'With all due respect, Sir, the minister should also not have behaved in that manner.'

Naturally, this led to a heated argument between the irrigation minister, the CM and me, toward the end of which the CM thumped the table in front of him and shouted, 'How dare you talk to the chief minister of Bihar like this? You better start looking for another job!'

'Sir, I am a gentleman, and expect to be treated as one. I am not used to being shouted at. If you want to shout, you must choose another audience. And as far as looking for another job is concerned, I can become a chief minister someday, but you can never become an IAS officer,' I replied as I calmly collected my papers and walked out of the room.

The loud arguments had clearly been heard outside. When I strode out of the room, the state's irrigation secretary, who had accompanied the chief minister to Dumka, advised me not to escalate the matter, assuring me that he would try and help me upon his return to Patna. I told him I could not care less. I still went to see the CM and his minister off at the airstrip, as it was part of my official duties. On the way back, the SP, DIG and the civil surgeon also tried to persuade me not to escalate the issue. I informed them that I was not bothered about the consequences.

I was only worried about what Babuji would say.

When I reached home, I discovered that news of the incident had preceded me. My father looked anxious and asked, 'What happened?'

'Nothing much,' I said, trying to avoid a conversation on the issue. But Babuji insisted on knowing the details. 'The CM and the minister tried to humiliate me in public and I protested. We had a heated argument after that,' I replied.

I was stunned by what he said next. Instead of reprimanding me, as I had feared he would, my father said, 'Why didn't you beat them up?'

Reassured by Babuji's remark, I prepared myself to face the fallout. Soon enough, I received a call from commissioner Kashyap, enquiring about the incident, and I gave him a detailed account of what had happened. He told me not

to worry, and promised to stand by me, asking me to send a detailed, written report. I also got a call from BD Pande, the chief secretary, who had been specially sent to Bihar in the rank of secretary to the Government of India (in those days the chief secretary of the state had the rank of only additional secretary in the GOI) to more effectively oversee the relief work for the unprecedented drought. I told him what had happened but, unlike Kashyap, he remained non-committal.

Later, BK Singh, deputy secretary in the state's appointments department, and an IAS officer who had been one of my SDOs earlier, called to inform me that I had been transferred and was required to report to the secretariat in Patna immediately. When he said that it was likely that a more important assignment awaited me, I apprised him of what had happened earlier in the day, explaining the real reason for my transfer. I also called the additional collector who was supposed to take charge from me, asking him to come to my office early the following morning to count the stamps in the treasury. This gave him a clear indication of my immediate departure.

When I left for Patna the next day, I was gratified to see the crowd that had assembled to bid me goodbye. It consisted of various segments of the population, who seemed genuinely sad to see me go. My run-in with the CM and the irrigation minister went on to become part of the folklore in Bihar, with my parting words to the chief minister inadvertently becoming quite the quotable quote.

After all, it is not often that a bureaucrat and a political leader (that too the chief minister of a state) get into such a fracas. I was well aware that the repercussions could prove to be quite dire for me. If I did escape them, it would only be by the skin of my teeth.

In Patna, I met with various officers, including the additional chief secretary PP Aggrawal (ICS) and other colleagues, who were keen to hear my story. However, the senior officers also wanted to stay on the right side of the political powers-that-be and were reluctant to take up the cudgels on my behalf. They told me how both the CM and the minister had been furious at my behaviour and, on their return to Patna, had wanted me to be transferred and placed under immediate suspension.

BD Pande was away from Patna and not present in the Cabinet meeting that followed. I was saved from certain suspension by the presence of mind of the other additional chief secretary, Sachidanand Singh, a promoted IAS officer, who asserted in the Cabinet meeting—quite wrongly, I might add—that my suspension

would have to be approved by the Government of India, saying he was not sure whether that approval would be forthcoming.

A compromise was reached, in the form of a decision to transfer me immediately. The Opposition leaders sensed an opportunity to embarrass the government on the issue and showed an interest in meeting me, but I avoided them as I had no wish to politicise the incident or gain political mileage out of it. Compare it with the behaviour of the bureaucracy today, when such incidents are used to gain personal publicity.

After the episode, it became difficult for me to secure a posting as no minister was willing to touch me with a barge pole and I had no takers from any department. However, one of the ministers, Bhola Prasad Singh of the Socialist Party, at least showed an interest in meeting me. A friend of mine fixed an appointment for me at his house in Patna's Lohanipur mohalla. I reached his place at the appointed time and was ushered into the courtyard where I found the minister getting a vigorous '*champi*' (head massage). When I introduced myself, he asked me bluntly even before he offered me a chair, 'Did you tell the chief minister that he was not a gentleman?'

I replied politely, 'No sir. I only said that *I* was a gentleman and should be treated as one.'

'Both mean the same,' he said, adding, 'I am a very hard taskmaster and you will have to work very hard in my department.' His department was local self-government. It was of no great interest to me but what choice did I have?

I replied politely, 'Sir, I have worked hard all my life. I was working hard even in Dumka and, given a chance, I will work hard again in your department as well.' The minister had returned from a ten-hour-long marathon Cabinet meeting and badly needed the massage, but it seems that neither the comfort of the champi nor my assertions were enough to persuade him to take a risk on me.

So, I had no choice but to proceed on a month's leave, extending it by another month later. My youngest sister Manju's marriage had been fixed with Madhukar, a boy from Dumka, and arrangements for the wedding, which was a mere fortnight away, were already in full swing. When I returned to Dumka, people assured me not to worry about my sister's wedding and asked me to stay back and get the wedding solemnised in Dumka itself. They promised me that the wedding would be celebrated in a much grander way than if I had continued as the deputy commissioner of the district.

I thanked them for their support but decided to pack up and leave Dumka for good as soon as possible. Within a few days, we packed our limited belongings, put the heavier stuff in one room of the house, vacated the rest and left for Ranchi where my brother Bijay was posted. Manju's wedding was solemnised, without a

hitch, from his house in Ranchi.

In the meantime, I had made another trip to Patna to meet the chief secretary BD Pande. My meeting with him did not go well at all. First, he asked me about the incident and after I had described it in detail, he shot back, 'You should not have lost your temper.'

'Sir, I was subjected to extreme humiliation,' I replied.

'Will you open fire on a crowd if you feel humiliated?' he asked.

'Sir, this situation was different', I replied.

At this point, he uttered his famous words of wisdom. 'Yashwant, in the civil service you must have the skin of a rhinoceros.'

I let the matter rest there and did not take issue with him but, I realise now, that his advice was just water off a duck's back as far as I was concerned. I have never been able to develop a thick skin, much less one like a rhinoceros.

Since I did not receive any posting order within a month of going on leave, I had no choice but to extend it by another month. In those days, I was fond of volunteering for odd jobs as well as the occasional call to arms. Back in 1962, when the Sino-Indian war had broken out, I had volunteered to join the army to fight the Chinese. Accompanied by my friend Bhagwan, I had even gone to the army recruitment centre in Patna to offer my services, telling the officer there about my training in the NCC, among other things. Naturally, while my offer was appreciated it was not accepted and I had to return to Giridih disappointed.

Before the Dumka episode, I had opted for a job in the Minerals and Metals Trading Corporation (MMTC) of India and the state government had forwarded my name to the central government. It was the only tenuous link I had for a job in Delhi. My father-in-law, who was quite conservative and rather horrified by my Dumka outburst, felt deeply worried about my future. He spoke to his ICS colleague, KB Lall, who was secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and an officer of high repute. Lall used my MMTC option to absorb me into his ministry as under secretary, even jokingly telling my father-in-law that since I had fought with the chief minister, I deserved to be in the ministry and not the MMTC. So, at the end of my two-month leave, I moved to New Delhi and joined the Ministry of Commerce as an under secretary.

My official release from Bihar was not without its share of drama either. The chief minister was reluctant to release me. I approached his secretary RR Prasad (IAS), who was sympathetic toward me, to use his influence with the CM in letting me go. Prasad succeeded in convincing him by arguing that I would still be under the state government's disciplinary control while on deputation to GOI, and that it would not come in the way of the state government taking suitable disciplinary action against me, if required. Even BD Pande was surprised when he learnt that

the CM had agreed to let me go on central deputation.

Thus ended the saga of the Santhal Parganas. I narrowly escaped the ignominy and humiliation of being suspended from service and was able to land safely in Delhi and begin a new chapter in my life, albeit in a manner that was completely unanticipated and unplanned. But I decided not to be cowed down by the experience. The episode in Dumka did not, in any way, dim my courage to stand up for what I considered to be right.

Under KB Lall, the Ministry of Commerce had come to be known as the 'ministry of sons and sons-in-law', since most officers selected to work in the ministry had some VIP link or another.

I was assigned the charge of dealing with India's trade with the six countries of the European Economic Community (EEC). I shared a single bay (smallest) room with another under secretary, a venerable old man called Bhatnagar. However, after the pleasant green hills and vales of the Santhal Parganas, the huge house in Dumka, my big office as the DC and all the 'thaat-baat' (splendour) of the district, Delhi turned out to be a huge disappointment. My work load was also lighter than I had ever experienced before. For an officer used to hard and demanding work, too much unutilised time can be a burden. I remember checking my watch frequently, waiting for it to be five o' clock so I could finally leave.

No government accommodation was available to a junior officer like me, so we had to make do with a rented first-floor flat in Green Park. We led an uncomfortable life until one day an alarming incident forced our hand. Little Sharmila had been admitted to her mother's old school, Convent of Jesus and Mary, and she used to commute by the school bus. My wife used to drop and fetch her from the bus stop every day. One afternoon, on reaching the bus stop, Nilima found that the bus had already dropped the kids off and gone, but there was no sign of our daughter. Frantic, she looked everywhere, only to be disappointed.

Alarmed and worried about what could happen to a five-year-old kid on her own, we ran helter-skelter in our search, until the school called to say that our little girl was safely back in school. Evidently, Sharmila had missed our stop and failed to step out, so the driver had taken her back to the school. It was this experience that persuaded us to leave Green Park and settle for whatever government accommodation was available nearer to central Delhi.

Much to our relief, we were soon allotted accommodation in the newly-

constructed Curzon Road hostel, a much safer place. It was a small flat comprising of only two rooms and had been built for the delegates of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) that was held in Delhi in 1968.

As chance would have it, Ramaswami Mani also joined the Ministry of Commerce as under secretary after completing his Ph.D. from Harvard University. He was given the prestigious charge of under secretary in the Trade Policy Division and was soon involved in the preparations for the UNCTAD conference. Once again, fate had placed us together and in equivalent positions, but I still could not shake off the feeling that my desk was less important than his. I had no option but to live with it.

One of my regrets, following my sudden transfer from Dumka, was that I could not meet Jaiprakash Narayan, as planned, after my argument with the Bihar CM. As I have mentioned, JP was the President of the Bihar Relief Committee, which had been running many free kitchens during the Bihar famine. He had appealed to people to make contributions to the Committee to carry on the relief work.

I had also organised a musical show at Dumka starring my brother-in-law Kamlesh, who was a talented musician and an accordion player. We had collected about one lakh rupees, which I was supposed to hand over to JP. Since this involved travelling to Jamui in the adjoining district of Munger, my sudden transfer had automatically forced me to abort this plan.

During my unhappy days in the ministry, I came across a small newspaper report one day, mentioning that JP was in Delhi and staying with his friend, JJ Singh. I found out JJ Singh's phone number and address in Friends Colony and called him up, asking to speak to JP. Instead of JP, it was his wife, Prabhavatiji, who answered the phone. My name must have rung a bell for she readily gave me an appointment with JP.

The following day, JP and I had a long chat, where I also told him about my argument with the CM in Dumka. He said he was sorry to hear about it and told me how he had issued a statement after the Dumka incident, advising ministers to be more careful in dealing with civil servants. I confided my unhappiness about being in Delhi and, in fact, with the IAS in general, telling him I wanted to quit the service and do something more worthwhile with my life.

JP did not respond to my confession immediately but agreed to meet me again.

I met him several times after this, where we discussed my plans in some detail. JP later agreed to my proposal to quit the IAS and offered to give me charge of the Tarun Shanti Sena, which was patterned on the lines of the American Peace Corps. He also offered to pay me an additional salary of ₹250 per month as the managing trustee of the Rajendra Memorial Trust, which had been set up in memory of the former President of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad. In addition, he also offered me a

two-room accommodation in Sadaquat Ashram near Digha in Patna.

The offer came with one rider, though: he wanted to know my wife's reaction to these plans. I told him honestly that, given her background, she would need some persuasion and JP expressed a desire to meet her.

Rameshwar Thakur, a chartered accountant, was a close friend of JP's. He was also known to me from my Dumka days as he belonged to Godda, which was one of the sub-divisions of the Santhal Parganas. He later joined the Congress party and went on to become a minister in the Government of India, as well as governor of Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Thakur was aware of my plans and JP's wish to meet my wife, so he invited Nilima and me for lunch at his place one day, along with JP and Prabhavatiji. When we met, Prabhavatiji hugged my wife warmly, smiled and said, 'Beti, welcome! You are soon going to join our family.'

My wife was obviously surprised, as she had not expected such a degree of finality to our plans. She did not reply but could not stop a teardrop escaping from the corner of her eye. I did not notice it but, evidently, JP did, and came to his own conclusions that he later conveyed to me. Nilima stayed glum and silent during the lunch and only participated in small talk. We eventually said our goodbyes and left.

After a few days, I received a letter from JP stating that he was not convinced that my wife was fully on board regarding our plans. He added that her support was imperative for beginning my new life and advised me to wait until Nilima was fully convinced. Thus, my plans to leave the IAS and join JP first came unstuck in 1968.

It would be a while before they would bear fruit.

Back at the ministry, lack of enough work in the office and the huge amount of free time started weighing heavily on me, making me feel very demoralised. I consulted a few friends about broaching the subject with KB Lall, but they strongly advised me against it. They warned me that, as a former ambassador to the EEC in Brussels, he knew more about our commercial relations with the bloc than most and would ask me probing questions, which I would not be able to answer—an outcome that was bound to be negative.

After some hesitation, I mustered enough courage and dropped in, unannounced, at KB Lall's residence in the evening one day. He had already changed into a dressing gown and chose to meet me as he was. I told him the

purpose of my visit. 'I don't have a full day's work', I said, adding, 'I am used to working hard and can certainly do more.' Contrary to what I had been told, neither did he chastise me, nor did he ask any embarrassing questions, choosing instead to end the meeting with a thoughtful 'Hmm...!'

A few days later, during a weekly meeting with ministry officials, Lall asked a senior officer about the progress of work that had been assigned to him. After patiently hearing his reply, he nonchalantly said, 'I think you need more assistance. Why don't you take Yashwant to assist you with the work?' From that day on, I was given additional charge of looking after the trade comissioners (TC) section in the ministry, which dealt with officers of all Indian embassies abroad who handled commercial and economic work, reporting to the Ministry of Commerce.

My gamble had paid off.

The deputy secretary under whom I served as under secretary was a fellow Bihari, Muchkund Dubey of the Indian Foreign Service, who went on to become the foreign secretary. Dubey was an internationally-acclaimed economic diplomat. My joint secretary was an extremely competent IAS officer from the Karnataka cadre, DK Srinivasachar. He rarely smiled and had a reputation as a no-nonsense person who was difficult to please. I enjoyed working under them. The other officer I worked closely with was SK Singh of the foreign service who also became the foreign secretary of India later.

I vividly remember my first trip to Western Europe. An official trade delegation led by Ghamandi Lal Bansal, who was the secretary-general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), was supposed to visit Italy for trade promotion. It consisted of representatives from various firms and I was appointed its member secretary. It was a two-week-long trip during which we covered Rome and other Italian cities like Milan, Florence, Bologna and Turin, among others. It was my first exposure to Western Europe and a great learning experience. Back home, I soon acquired a degree of expertise in trade with West Europe, all of which had subsequently been added to my charge.

During this time, I was invited by the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) to give a talk on India's trade with West Europe. I worked hard and gave the trainees a comprehensive talk on the subject. As I was leaving, one of the faculty members requested me to leave my notes behind so that they could be used for the benefit of the trainees, which I did. A few days later, I was shocked to find an article on the subject, under the name of the very same faculty member, published in a major financial newspaper. It was an exact reproduction of my talk!

Meanwhile, Srinivasachar had been replaced by BN Swarup, an IAS officer of the UP cadre and a close relative of KB Lall. He had just returned from a posting in Geneva. For some inexplicable reason it seemed Swarup did not like me. I was

summoned to his room one day, where he proceeded to angrily fling a newspaper on the table and exclaim, 'See? How much information other people have on West Europe? Only we seem to be sitting here in complete ignorance.' It was the same newspaper in which the article had appeared! I told him I would be back soon, went to my room, picked up a copy of the text of my talk and rushed back to bluntly tell him the truth. I was happy to see the shocked expression on his face.

Soon thereafter, I was selected for training in foreign trade with the British Board of Trade in London—a four-month-long programme. This was conducted in the City of London College situated in 'The City', which is the hub of all financial and commercial activities in London. My fellow trainees had come from various other developing countries, making it another interesting and useful sojourn.

It was also my first visit to England and I couldn't help but remember what my eldest brother-in-law, S Prasad, had told me way back in 1950. He had lived in England for two years and, as a curious, wide-eyed youngster, I remember asking him once, 'What did you find most interesting and special about England?' He had looked at me and said, gently, 'When you visit England, you will notice that every inch of the land has been cared for and tended by the hands of man.'

This piece of information had stayed in my sub-conscious mind and I recalled it during my own travels in the UK, only to realise that my brother-in-law had been absolutely correct. Years later, in one of my budgets, I mentioned the need for preparing a long term (50-year) land use plan for our country. Like many other good proposals this too got lost in the system somewhere. The idea had come directly from what my brother-in-law had said years ago and what I had seen for myself in England.

One day, a faculty member at the College asked me a question in class. While answering, instead of using the word 'ok', I inadvertently used the Hindi word 'accha'. The professor burst out laughing. Apparently, like others from his generation, he had served with the army in India and told me that he was delighted to hear the word after a very long time indeed.

London turned out to be a string of interesting experiences. Like everyone else, I also had to buy an umbrella in London, given its unpredictable weather. One day I forgot the umbrella in a post office where I had gone for some work. The next day when I went looking for it, I found it exactly where I had left it. On my return to India, via Bombay, I kept it carefully with the rest of my luggage near me. Alas, it was gone the moment I became a little careless and moved my gaze away from it. Thus, apart from the training I received in export promotion, London taught me other lessons as well.

The issue of our promotions as deputy secretaries came up a couple of years later in 1969. Apart from Mani and me from our batch, there was also Vinod

Dikshit who was another under secretary in the commerce ministry. Mani felt that it would be difficult for all three of us to get promoted within the same ministry. He was sure of his promotion as he had done outstanding work during the UNCTAD conference, he explained, as well as Vinod's as he was the son of the powerful Congress politician, Uma Shankar Dikshit.

I was the odd one out, he warned, and, thus, more likely to be shifted to another ministry or repatriated to Bihar. He suggested I try my luck in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport, where he knew the joint secretary (administration). He even set up an appointment for me with the JS concerned.

Given the suspicion that informed our relationship, I had convinced myself that Mani wanted me out of the commerce ministry and, therefore, I did not keep my appointment with the JS in the shipping and transport ministry. Years later, I was destined to take the place of the same JS in that ministry but the time for it had not yet come. Fortunately, Mani's foreboding did not bear fruit and all three of us were eventually promoted and accommodated in the commerce ministry itself.

By then, I had already spent a little over two years in Delhi and had become familiar with life there. Sharmila and Jayant were studying at the Convent of Jesus and Mary and St. Columba's, respectively, while Sumant was still in nursery school. We had a lively set of neighbours in our Curzon Road Hostel complex. Nilima had even opened a small school called Humpty-Dumpty Nursery School in one of the two rooms, where Sumant, understandably, was also a pupil. Amit, my sister Madhuri's son, also came to live with us to pursue his studies in Delhi. Every weekend, we used to visit Nilima's parents and watch a movie on their black and white television set, quite a rare possession at the time. It was a crowded existence, but we had a good social circle and life was comfortable.

PART III

THE IAS YEARS – 2

CHAPTER 9

A DIPLOMAT IN GERMANY

It was not unusual for officers of the Ministry of Commerce to be considered for a posting for commercial work in one of our embassies abroad. So, it was in late 1970 that I suddenly learnt I had been selected for the post of first secretary (commercial) at the Indian embassy in Bonn—capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany as it was then known.

In fact, I had been considered for such a posting even earlier, first as trade representative in East Germany and later as first secretary (commercial) in London. But on both occasions the proposal could not materialise for some reason and certainly not because of any inadequacy on my part. My eventual posting to Bonn also faced some problems from unexpected quarters, but these were finally overcome, as I will explain later.

When Mani heard the news, he marched into my flat and accused me of having used my father-in-law's influence to secure the posting, which I hotly denied, naturally. Later, he was also posted as first Secretary (commercial) at the Indian embassy in Bangkok. This enabled him, given his talent, to have a completely different career as an international civil servant in the years ahead.

I left for Germany, along with my wife and three children, in January 1971. We were all very excited. We flew from Delhi to Frankfurt by an Air India flight and arrived there in the morning. We boarded the train for Bonn at Frankfurt hauptbahnhof (German for main railway station), travelled along the river Maine for some distance, and then followed the river Rhine. It was an exhilarating experience.

The Rhine Valley is one of the most beautiful places in the world, surrounded by hills on both sides, with the river itself in the middle and castles and forts perched atop the hills. Then there were its famous vineyards. Riveted, we peered out of the windows at the beautiful scenery, but the kids opened their books and were soon engrossed in their pages. We kept trying to persuade Sharmila and Jayant to read later and enjoy the scenery instead, only to have them lift their gazes

disinterestedly to the view and return to their books again. Apparently, Enid Blyton and her tales of adventure were far more exciting to them than German hills and castles! Sumant, of course, was too small to either read a book or enjoy the beautiful scenery.

We were received at Bonn station by a staff member of the Indian embassy and accommodated in a hotel till we could find regular accommodation. Hardev Bhalla, first secretary (political) and Head of Chancery at the embassy, invited us for dinner the day we arrived in Bonn. His wife, Manorama, was also posted in Bonn as first secretary, (information). Friends referred to them as Bhalla and Bhalli. Kewal Singh (ICS) was our ambassador to West Germany. The deputy chief of Mission was an IFS officer of the 1957 batch, Saad Hashmi. He was considered very close to Kewal Singh, who had insisted on his posting to Bonn when he was appointed as the ambassador.

My relationship with Saad was a little tense to begin with. It seemed Kewal Singh had written to the MEA at the behest of Saad, saying that since he had a counsellor-rank officer already in Saad, there was no need for a separate first secretary (commercial). This had put a spanner in the works for me and delayed my departure, until the issue was settled through the strong intervention of the Ministry of Commerce in my favour. I soon discovered, however, that Saad was a fine gentleman and a very jovial person, who held no personal grudge against me. Kewal Singh also became extremely cordial toward me as time went by.

We started looking around for a house, as well as schools for the children. We finally settled for an independent house in Niederbachem, a suburb of Bonn. It was quite far from the embassy and not connected by public transport, but it had very pretty surroundings. Nobody from the Indian embassy lived so far away. The furthest anyone stayed from the embassy was at Mehlem, which was on the way to Niederbachem, and was its tram station.

The ambassador's beautiful residence was in Bad Godesberg, in the same direction as our house but still quite far. Saad had rented a house on the other side of town, and other embassy officials lived in apartments in the town itself. Later, when Deb Mukherjee replaced Hardev Bhalla, he too rented a house in Niederbachem. Deb and his wife Purobi became our closest neighbours, even though their house was a fair distance from ours.

The Indian government, in those days, had no facility to pay for diplomats' children studying in international schools. Language was a problem and we had to admit Sharmila and Jayant to the British Embassy Preparatory School (BEPS), while Sumant went to a neighbourhood German nursery school. However, we could not afford this for long and had to shift Sharmila to a German-medium school that had some facilities for international students. Jayant continued in

BEPS.

The children soon became adept, not only at speaking German but also at tackling the efficient tram and bus systems of the unfamiliar city. There was a large American establishment in Bad Godesberg, including a club with an indoor badminton court and outdoor tennis courts. It offered complimentary membership to the diplomats posted in Bonn and I was happy to avail of its facilities and start playing the two games again. Gradually, life settled down on an even keel.

Some of the things I remember very well and fondly about our time in Germany are the people we met there and the varied experiences we had, especially as a family. Also, I still remember many of the lessons that I learnt while I was in Germany—both personal and professional.

Uday Abhyankar, who passed away recently, was an IFS probationer posted in Bonn at the time, and was dating Ambassador Kewal Singh's daughter, Gita, whom he later married. The Singhs were initially a little worried about the relationship and requested my wife and I to keep an eye on the young couple. Quite often, Uday would tell them that he and Gita were going out only to visit us, a promise he did not always keep, but he was a fine person and we told Gita's parents not to worry. This also brought us closer to the Singhs.

I first learnt the etiquettes of diplomatic life during my posting at Bonn, including familiarity with the several types of wines and how, as well as when, to drink which, since Germany is famous for them. The posting was valuable in many other ways as well.

Quite importantly, I learnt the value of punctuality in Germany. '8 p.m.' meant '8 p.m.', neither a few minutes before nor after. I learnt it the hard way, after turning up late for a few dinners early on during my posting in Bonn, and arriving only after dinner had already been served. I specifically recall a dinner invitation from a senior lady officer in the German government. My wife and I drove to her place in our car. We had calculated the time it would take to drive there yet we were a few minutes early. So, I decided to turn the car around and park it before going in. As I did so, I noticed a man standing outside in the bitter cold under a tree, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. He was a junior of the host and had travelled by public transport and was now waiting out in the cold as it was not yet 8 p.m. All three of us entered the house together, exactly at eight.

It was a good lesson in punctuality, learning to be neither early nor late but

exactly ‘on the dot’.

The other, and valuable, lesson was about respecting others’ time. Nobody in Germany would drop in at someone else’s place without a prior appointment. Indians at the embassy, too, followed the practice vis-à-vis each other. In India, we shamelessly drop in not only at the homes of friends and relatives but also at their offices—making ourselves comfortable and expecting to be served tea and coffee—often choosing to leave at our own sweet will. It shows a complete disregard for another person’s time. In politics, it is even worse where leaders have a right to be late and others can also drop in at the leader’s house at any time of night or day.

Another valuable lesson I learnt was about obeying traffic rules. There was a saying in the country that ‘a German would readily give up her life, rather than the right of way’. Not only on the autobahns, but also everywhere else, there were road signs indicating both the speed limit and the right of way. Once, early during my stay in Bonn, I was involved in a nasty accident in which my prized possession, a new red Mercedes car, was badly damaged. I was driving on a street that also had a tram line running through it. A tram was moving in front of me, rather slowly, and there was no traffic coming from the opposite direction. As I quickly tried to overtake the tram, another car exiting from a side lane onto the main road suddenly crashed into mine.

The cops, of course, were quick to arrive, unlike the police in Giridih. The other driver tried to convince them that it was my fault, since I was overtaking the tram, which was not allowed. I was at a complete disadvantage as I did not even know a smattering of German. Fortunately, a local employee of the embassy, who was of Indian origin, happened to pass that way and stopped on seeing us. He managed to convince the police in fluent German that since there was no signboard against overtaking a tram, and since the other driver was coming from a side street, I had the right of way. The police decided in my favour and the other driver had to pay a hefty sum toward the repair of my car. I also learnt that, unlike India, in Germany there is no time wasted in ‘denting and painting’. They simply replaced the damaged parts.

Insurance rules in Germany were equally tough. If you got involved in more than one traffic accident, the insurance companies would refuse to issue an insurance policy. This meant being grounded, since you could not drive without an insurance policy. Your driver’s licence could also be suspended if you violated traffic rules often.

I will never forget an incident that occurred when I was driving back alone to Bonn from Frankfurt one day. Overtaking was clearly forbidden on that part of the road. Ignoring the sign, and since the road was clear, I decided to overtake the car in front of me. I was horrified to discover that it was an undercover police car. As

soon as I overtook it, the police sign went up and I was forced to stop. The policeman jumped out and asked for my car papers, driving licence and identification. I produced my diplomatic identity card, which meant I could not be prosecuted.

However, I will also never forget what the policeman said to me in German. '*Herr Sinha, überholen in Deutschland sehr teur ist*!' (Mr. Sinha, overtaking in Germany is very expensive!) There was nothing I could say or do, except apologise profusely before moving on.

At this point, I cannot resist talking about a much-desired dream come true—my red Mercedes.

I had placed an order for a Mercedes car a few months after we arrived in Bonn. When the car was ready for delivery, I decided to go to Stuttgart to pick it up from the factory itself. It was quite a change from my black Fiat in Delhi. It also fulfilled a long-standing desire of mine—from the days when I was studying German in Patna during my undergraduate days. Back then, I had often dreamt of driving a red Mercedes car through the Black Forest one day. So, I specially selected that colour for my new ride. I later realised that a new car would attract a heavy customs duty on our eventual return to India, which I could not afford to pay.

Finally, and quite reluctantly, I decided to sell the red Mercedes after two years and settled instead for a second-hand white Mercedes car when I was posted to Frankfurt. However, not being able to afford the customs duty even on this, I was forced to sell it before moving back to India. We had also bought a second-hand Volkswagen Beetle in Bonn, which my wife drove, especially to drop and pick up the kids from the tram station at Mehlem, a little distance away from our house. Nilima, never a good driver, had several mishaps with the vehicle, which was quite decrepit to begin with.

During my own road travels around Europe, I felt very proud of my German number plate and the big 'D' (Deutcshland) sign on my car, which meant that I came from a country where traffic rules were religiously followed. It was also representative of the discipline that is associated with the Germans.

The changes in personnel manning the embassy continued according to its pre-ordained routine. Uday Abhyankar was promoted as second secretary and was replaced by Tuhin Verma. We were happy about Uday's promotion, and the posting of Tuhin as both he and his wife Rekha were from Bihar. We knew their families well, and became quite friendly with them too.

Being an Indian diplomat in Germany, which had emerged as a post-War industrial powerhouse, was quite an experience. As first secretary (commercial), it was my job to sell India and its products, quite an uphill task in those days. I dutifully did the rounds but cannot claim to have delivered outstanding results. The quality of Indian products was a major issue with the German importers, despite all the arrangements for inspection of quality that were in place.

I shall never forget the experience I had with Frau Utterman, who was an importer of garments. She was an imposing woman whom I had met at an exhibition for garments in Cologne, where I had successfully persuaded her to give India and Indian garments a chance. She agreed and soon placed an order for some shirts.

Things went smoothly, but only for a while.

One day, she barged into my office at the embassy, threw some shirts on the table and shouted, 'Just look at their collars! Can I sell such poor-quality shirts in Germany? No! Who will ever buy such stuff?' I looked at the shirt collars. Admittedly, the stitching was visibly uneven. I duly apologised to her and promised to remedy the situation. In fact, I quickly discovered what the problem was.

In India, shirt collars were made manually in those days, while producers elsewhere had already switched to machines. The machine-made collars were far superior in quality to collars stitched manually on sewing machines. I do not think Frau Utterman imported shirts from India after this experience, but our remedial efforts did help India emerge as a major exporter of readymade garments later. These efforts, of course, were supplemented by high-profile visits from India.

Just before the Bangladesh war of 1971, the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, had sent Jayaprakash Narayan to various countries to meet the top leadership and lay out India's case. JP, accompanied by his wife Prabhavati, also visited West Germany and Ambassador Singh nominated me to act as his liaison officer. I was thrilled to meet JP and his wife again and tried to discharge my responsibilities as sincerely as I could. They were also very happy to see me. JP personally knew Willy Brandt, the then Chancellor of West Germany, from his socialist days. He met Brandt and others and carried out the task assigned to him with great aplomb. I realised that JP was highly respected, not only in India but also abroad. Kewal Singh was also pleased with the visit, as it made his task easier.

Soon after that visit, the Bangladesh war broke out. Our victory in the war led to a new-found respect for India in the eyes of the Germans. When Indian troops eventually withdrew from Bangladesh, several German friends even told me that we should have stayed longer, to fully restore peace and calm before leaving. This is a problem that continues to haunt outside military interventions and eventual troop withdrawals—in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places. India's intervention in Bangladesh, however, was quite different. It was cleaner and, most importantly, we were able to withdraw our troops in good time.

Another memorable visit was that of prime minister Indira Gandhi herself. Kewal Singh wanted to make it a resounding success. Apart from contributing to discussions on trade and economic issues on the agenda of the talks, he especially asked my wife and me to help with other arrangements. This included ensuring that the dinner that Mrs. Gandhi was to host for top German dignitaries at the hotel she was staying in had a distinctive Indian touch. Some Indian dishes had to be included in the menu and there were to be ethnic Indian decorations in the hall.

Nilima and I travelled to Hamburg, to a warehouse of the Handlooms and Handicrafts Exports Corporation (HHEC) of India. From there we brought reams of Indian silk and decorated the hall beautifully to exude a warm, Indian ambience. Like several other officers of my rank at the embassy, Nilima and I were not invited to the dinner. However, when Kewal Singh inspected the hall and realised how hard we had worked, he decided to make an exception. While introducing us to Mrs. Gandhi, Kewal Singh specially mentioned that we had been responsible for decorating the hall. Pleased with the decoration, Mrs. Gandhi complimented us for our efforts. There is no doubt that she was a very charismatic leader and commanded a lot of respect in the international community. We were thrilled to meet and talk to her.

Sometime later, we invited Kewal Singh and his wife for dinner at our place. When he arrived, he announced with a serious face, 'Yashwant, there is some bad news. I have been transferred to Delhi as foreign secretary.'

'It is great news, sir! It calls for a celebration!' The dinner turned into a minor celebration for his elevation. He left Bonn soon thereafter, as did Saad. Singh was replaced by YK Puri (ICS).

Kewal Singh must have liked my work in Bonn because, as foreign secretary, he approved a rather radical proposal that was initiated by Saad. All the commercial work in West Germany was centralised in the Consulate General in Frankfurt. GP Mathur, who had succeeded Suresh Kumar as Consul General of India in Frankfurt, was transferred elsewhere and I was sent to Frankfurt in his place. Another officer, Chhaba, was transferred from Bonn as vice consul to assist me, and the commercial section in the embassy at Bonn was abolished.

Ambassador Puri was not very pleased with this arrangement but coming as it did from the MEA, there was little he could do about it.

On my part, I was happy to leave Bonn and move to Frankfurt—a much bigger city and the centre of trade, commerce and finance. Bonn, in turn, was known as the Bundesdorf (federal village), even among the Germans. My official responsibilities in Frankfurt included a lot of protocol duties, apart from commercial work, as it was at the crossroads of international air routes, especially from India to the West. As a result, we had our hands full with VIPs, who expected to be received by either me or the vice consul and did not like to be attended to by a junior staff member.

Obviously, I could not attend to all of them personally at the airport. So, I decided to designate my personal assistant Puran Chand as protocol officer to look after these VIPs, including MPs, in transit. This solved the problem, as Puran Chand was a highly efficient colleague who used to find solutions to a problem first, if he could, and bring them to me only if he couldn't.

In Frankfurt, we admitted all our three children to German-medium schools as they knew the language well enough by then to be able to cope with class activities. The schools were not too far away and the three could easily walk there. My wife, fascinated by the beautiful displays she saw in shop windows, decided to join a big department store of one of Germany's oldest retailers, Hertie, as a trainee, to learn the art of window display.

We also had to entertain on a much larger scale than in Bonn and usually hosted dinners for visiting Indian VIPs at home, even though it entailed a lot of extra cooking and cleaning work for us. With local help being very expensive, Nilima had to manage the cooking and cleaning for the events herself. I helped, of course, but insisted, as is my habit, that we wash the dishes and clean the kitchen, including pots, pans and glassware, right after dinner instead of leaving them for the next morning. Often, after a large dinner, we had to continue clearing and cleaning far into the night. On one such occasion, Nilima was too tired to clear up and went off to sleep. I worked until late into the night, washing dishes, cleaning up, and tidying the dining room and the kitchen. It was well worth the effort, pleasantly surprising my wife with a sparkling, clean kitchen the following morning!

Much later, after my return to India—as I would sit in the officers' gallery of the Lok Sabha and look at the ministers who were present in the House, I'd notice that almost all of them, without exception, had been hosted by us for a meal at Frankfurt.

Frankfurt also saw extra footfalls because it was a very popular shopping destination, especially for electronic goods. Visiting Indians, including ministers,

would stop by (often unnecessarily, I might add) and we were under constant pressure to arrange their official programmes and meetings. The Germans had no time for such visiting Indian VIPs and we often had to settle for appointments of Indian cabinet ministers with mid-level German officials, as their ministers were unwilling to waste their time on ours.

This is how I learnt the importance of protocol and reciprocity as instruments of diplomacy. Every visitor, especially from the West, is generally treated as a visiting head of state in India, while even our senior visitors get shabby treatment in foreign countries. In Delhi, as well, a second secretary of a Western embassy would often invite senior officials of the government, and even MPs, for dinner and get a favourable response. Germany taught me to consciously observe protocol, often to a fault. Even today, I am very strict about following these norms.

Meanwhile, under KB Lall, the Ministry of Commerce had set up a Trade Development Authority to promote India's exports abroad. The Authority opened a few international offices, including one at Frankfurt. The officer posted there was Suman Kumar Modwel, an IAS officer of the 1959 batch from the UP cadre. I am sure he was posted to Frankfurt on merit, like, the rest of the officers who were posted abroad by the commerce ministry. But, and purely by coincidence, he also happened to be the son-in-law of Govind Narain (ICS).

Modwel's wife Chandan (Chikki) and their two children, Yamini and Rajat (Gogo), who were the same age as our kids, became our good friends and we had a lot of fun together. Ram Uberoi, a German of Indian origin married to a German lady, Karen, worked for a technical assistance programme (the Vollrath Plan) for India. They also became our close friends. Ram was a good singer and entertained us with popular Hindi film songs. Since we were only rarely able to see Bollywood films in Germany, Ram's Hindi film songs used to evoke a bittersweet nostalgia for home in all of us.

A highlight of our stay in Germany was the camping trip that the family undertook, visiting several countries in Europe. We bought a tent and a book on camping sites and set off, together with our three kids. First, however, we decided to take a practice trip to the Black Forest. Chikki and her two children also came with us to the Black Forest camp. While it was no doubt a dream come true—driving into the Black Forest in my red Mercedes car—we faced an unexpected problem upon arriving at our destination in the evening.

On unpacking the tent, we soon realised it was quite difficult to set it up. We had little idea about how it was to be done and tied ourselves, literally, into knots. Completely stumped, we struggled on as darkness began to fall. Fortunately, some helpful neighbours at the camping site came to our rescue and showed us how to set it all up.

Once we had acquired the requisite know-how, we could set up the tent ourselves, and quite quickly I must add, throughout the month-long trip. We first drove to Berlin and then north to Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo, passing several other towns on the way, easily setting up the tent every few days at various camping sites and generally feeling quite adventurous. Even the kids refrained from burying their noses in books and enjoyed the scenery for a change.

In East Berlin, we saw the famous museums, including the bust of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti in one of them. The children especially enjoyed the museum visit. West Berlin was of great interest to me as I had followed the events of the Second World War closely through books on the subject, particularly the last days of Adolf Hitler in the bunkers of Berlin. The city was still devastated and divided, and one could see signs of it all around the place. The Reichstag was in ruins, as was the Kurfürstendamm church. The bunkers were mostly destroyed, and the portions that remained were closed to the public. Unter den Linden, in the central Mitte district of Berlin, was still beautiful with its wide tree-lined road.

From Berlin we went to a camping site on the North Sea where we spent a night and then carried on further north to Copenhagen. Unfortunately, it started raining when we were there and so I decided to drive into Sweden, hoping that the rain would stop at some point of time. But that was not to be. The rain kept falling and I kept driving. Ultimately, after reaching a small town, I decided to just give up. Nature's fury had proven stronger than my will power.

We stopped in the market place, which bore a deserted look. Fortunately, a young man who was passing by proved helpful, and accompanied us to a house where they kept paying guests. The host was liberal in his approach and allowed us to use the basement to dry our clothes, without charging anything for it. The next day turned out to be bright and clear and we carried on to Stockholm and beyond without any hitch.

We went as far as Uppsala before driving into Norway, and on to Oslo. We planned to stop at some other camping sites on the way back, but I ran out of money. I was left with just enough cash for petrol for the way back, and decided to make the 800-km trip from Denmark back to Frankfurt without stopping anywhere except in parking lots. During the drive, while the others slept, I gave Sharmila the responsibility of chatting with me continuously to prevent me from dozing off – a duty the twelve-year old was only too delighted with.

We had been keen to see the Northern lights but even though I kept driving north through the lovely surroundings of Sweden, alas, there was no trace of them. Yet, it was a most memorable and fascinating adventure and a good educational experience for the children as well.

I must mention here that I have always been fond of driving. Driving on the beautiful and smooth roads of Europe, especially, was sheer pleasure and a lot of fun. So, I used to travel a lot by car. In fact, I once drove all by myself from Bonn to Geneva and back, merely to spend an evening with NK Singh.

Driving to West Berlin was different as it involved cutting through a long swathe of East Germany. The autobahn was surrounded on both sides with either concrete walls or heavily-barbed wire fencing, with guard posts at regular intervals. Petrol was also cheaper in East Germany. We had no problem in crossing over to East Berlin through Check Point Charlie that was meant for foreigners. There was a tower in East Berlin that overlooked West Berlin. It was said that the East Germans used to climb the tower to look at the bright lights of the West and feel nostalgic. Ultimately, the Berlin Wall was demolished in 1989 and the two Germanies were united. The will of the people had ultimately prevailed.

Life in Germany, however, was not always easy. A couple of incidents, among a few unpleasant ones, especially come to mind.

One evening, I returned from work only to be informed by my wife that a neighbour had misbehaved with Jayant, who was ten years old at the time. He was playing on the street with his friends, as usual, when their ball fell into the garden of our German neighbour. The other boys were aware of the fellow's temper, so they persuaded Jayant to approach him and ask for it back. The neighbour was very rough, and he not only scolded Jayant but also, perhaps, twisted his ears.

I was furious. 'How dare he?' I muttered under my breath as I marched to his house and confronted him. The man's bravado collapsed when he saw me in such a rage, and he apologised repeatedly to Jayant and me. His abject surrender in the face of my (justifiable) anger taught me another lesson—always confront bullies; do not let them get away with intimidation.

Another incident that I must mention here is when Sumant was bitten by a dog. He was playing in a public place when a dog, belonging to a person living at the end of our street, bit him on the leg. This is a major offence in Germany. The dog's owner was full of regret and offered to pay for Sumant's treatment, which included the much-dreaded but mandatory injections. Such an offer was of no use to us as we were scheduled to go back to India but his apology and the offer to pay for the treatment did soften us. In Germany, there is a concept of '*smirsch geld*' (pain money), which means that apart from compensation in such incidents, the victim is also entitled to compensation for the pain he or she suffers. I could have sued him

for it but decided to let it pass.

A few other tidbits from our stay in Germany are also worth a mention here, especially some of the people we met while living there.

LN Mishra, who was later killed in a train explosion in Bihar, was the commerce minister when I was in Germany, with NK Singh serving as his special assistant. NK's father, TP Singh (ICS), was the then finance secretary to the Government of India. NK himself went on to serve as the revenue secretary in the Government of India, as secretary to prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and later as a Rajya Sabha member. He is now the chairperson of the finance commission. He was regarded as a powerful civil servant and I will never forget Saad's joke about him. On one occasion, Saad told me that NK would be visiting Germany and then added, almost as an afterthought, that 'he would be accompanied by the commerce minister!' Such was his clout even then.

LN Mishra was transiting through Frankfurt on an Air India flight once, on his way back to Delhi from London. NK asked me to buy a few spectacle frames for Mishra, who was quite fond of German frames. When I went to buy them, I was greatly surprised to find that they were quite expensive, and I had to shell out a considerable sum of money to procure the required number. Mishra did not de-plane at Frankfurt and I went in to deliver the frames instead. He was happy with my choice but what really worried me was whether he would pay for them.

He chatted with me and, as enough time passed, I began to lose all hope of being reimbursed. Just as the plane was about to depart, and I was getting ready to move to the exit door, he asked me how much they had cost. I promptly told him the amount in German marks. Mishra told NK to pay me a certain amount in US dollars, which covered a little more than the amount I had paid. I took the money and left the aircraft, heaving a sigh of relief.

Politicians do not always disappoint. Sometimes, they also live up to your expectations.

Saad Hashmi and his wife Zarina, who later made a name for herself as an artist in New York, kept a beautiful house in Bonn. They had, among other objects d'art, an impressive collection of cut glass which was displayed in open glass shelves on one side of their living room in Bonn. Once, during a party the couple had thrown for some of their colleagues in the embassy, one of the guests inadvertently leaned on one of the shelves and the entire structure came crashing down to the floor, reducing the beautiful pieces to a heap of broken glass. Zarina and Saad, polished diplomats as they were, took it sportingly, but the loss of their prized collection must have been heart-breaking. After this experience, I never kept my glassware in open shelves.

I have already mentioned that Deb Mukherji had replaced Hardev Bhalla as first

secretary, Chancery. He was a jovial young man given to banter. One day, he met more than his match in a German neighbour of his. Both were mowing their lawn and started chatting with each other. The German asked Deb what exactly he did in the Indian embassy and Deb told him breezily, 'Oh, I just hang around the place.' The German's reply left Deb speechless. 'Oh, so you are the ambassador?' he shot back, tongue in cheek. We had a good laugh when Deb told us about the exchange.

But, like all good things in life, our tenure in West Germany soon came to an end.

Kewal Singh wanted me to continue in Frankfurt for another year but I was already on an extended term, having been away from my cadre for nearly seven years. The chief secretary of Bihar, PKJ Menon, was a stickler for rules and insisted that I return to the state. I had no choice but to comply. My memorable deputation to Germany came to an end in May 1974 and I returned to my home state, Bihar.

Meanwhile, the Indira Gandhi government had conducted the nuclear tests in India in May 1974, just before our return home later that same month. While this had come in for widespread international criticism, I couldn't help but notice that it had also created a new respect for India in the eyes of the Germans. At airports and other places, Indians started getting more courteous treatment, which had not been quite so evident earlier.

What I learnt from this experience is that you must be strong to command respect. The weak are generally ignored, if not ill-treated.

CHAPTER 10

BIHAR, DELHI, BIHAR

I returned to Patna and promptly reported for duty to PKJ Menon, who informed me that he wanted to post me as special secretary in the irrigation department. I protested, telling him that my experience was in industry, trade and commerce and that irrigation was hardly an area of specialisation for me.

Menon promised to reconsider. Sure enough, after a few days, I learnt that I had been posted as MD of the Patna Industrial Areas Development Authority (PIADA). It was a new outfit under the state's department of industry, responsible for developing industrial estates and even large industrial parks. Industrial units were offered plots within the area, complete with all infrastructural facilities, a strategy that has been enunciated periodically, in different guises, without much success in Bihar. This time, it was more of a serious effort to attract industries to the state, which was considered industrially backward. The office of the Authority was situated outside the secretariat in a building near the Gandhi Maidan in Patna.

The work was interesting but lay outside the normal gamut of a civil service job. Besides, I soon realised how completely 'exposed' I was in that office as it was in the centre of the town, at the eastern end of the iconic Gandhi Maidan. It was close to the shopping area and cinema halls. Friends and acquaintances would drop in unexpectedly, at various times during the day, completely oblivious to the fact that it was an office and not my living room. These unannounced visits often came with insistence for a cup of tea and a leisurely chat. The respect for time, especially of others', which we had imbibed in Germany, became a distant dream. I felt that my time was being wasted and was soon forced to become strict in this regard.

One of the industrial areas under my charge was next to the oil refinery of the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and the fertiliser factory of the Fertiliser Corporation of India (FCI) in Barauni, north of the Ganga. A local advisory board was attached to the Area, and one of its members was the CPI leader Chandrshekhar Singh, the former irrigation minister of Bihar and my bête noire from Dumka. I wondered how he would behave toward me but, when we met, he was the very picture of

courtesy. I also decided to let bygones be bygones.

In fact, sometime later when I was leaving Patna on my transfer to Delhi, in a farewell meeting of the advisory board of the Area, Chandrashekhar Singh expressed his unhappiness at my premature transfer. I remember him saying, 'If efficient officers like you are transferred in this manner, how will the state prosper?' It was a moment of supreme satisfaction for me, as it came from the very man who had told me eight years ago in Dumka that I did not deserve to be in the IAS! Alas, I had no such opportunity for reconciliation with Mahamaya Prasad Sinha.

Back in Patna, I had taken a house on rent in Pataliputra Colony and my parents and invalid brother had also moved in with us. Once again, we went through the process of the children's school admissions. Although we had found a Hindi tutor in Germany, it was difficult for them to adjust to the more rigorous system of examinations and tests in Bihar's schools, and tutoring them became an additional duty for my wife over the next few months. Nilima soon secured the job of a lecturer at the Arvind Mahila College, right at the other end of the city, to which she and another colleague of hers travelled daily on a rickshaw.

Alas, I could not bring my white Mercedes to India as I did not have enough money to pay the customs duty even on a second-hand car. So, I had sold it in Germany and returned to India without a vehicle. At that time, there were only two cars available in India—Ambassador and Fiat. The latter was cheaper and had a better resale value. The waiting list for it was very long but, fortunately, there was a government quota. I approached chief secretary Menon for help. He obliged, and I was allotted a Fiat soon after my arrival in Patna.

I selected a bright, yellow-coloured car that stayed with me for many years. I was reasonably excited at my new acquisition but nobody else in the family was that enthusiastic about it, after travelling in Mercedes cars in Germany. So, when I brought the new Fiat home and cheerily announced that it was here, none of the family members even came out to look at it. But they all fell in love with the little yellow car eventually.

I had not forgotten my discussions with JP and my earlier, unsuccessful plan to leave the IAS. When I returned to Patna from Germany in 1974, the JP movement in Bihar was at its peak. It had started as a student protest movement on 18 March 1974, but subsequently picked up speed and spread all over Bihar. Later, at the request of the students, JP had agreed to provide his leadership to it.

It soon gained momentum and became a nationwide people's movement against Mrs. Gandhi's rule.

On the strength of my earlier discussions with JP, I decided to seek a meeting with him again and he readily gave me an appointment. My close childhood friend,

Bhagwan, who was now a geologist with the Government of Bihar, also wanted to meet him, so we both went to the Mahila Charkha Samiti in Kadamkuan where JP stayed when in Patna. We thought the meeting would, at best, last a few minutes but JP spent an entire hour with us. He explained to us the reasons for his involvement in the movement, in detail, as well as the issues at its heart and how he planned to move forward.

In brief, this is what he said, 'I told Indu (Indira Gandhi), that there is a lot of corruption in her government and in the political system. Elections have become exorbitantly expensive and people are spending crores on them.' He named a leading Odia politician who had spent a hefty sum of money on a bypoll. 'Indu's reply,' JP continued, 'was that she had not given this kind of money to her candidate. She thinks I am naïve enough to believe that she is the only source of funds for her candidate!'

He then went on to add that the education system in Bihar was on the verge of collapse as casteism was rampant and the entire governmental hierarchy was creaking with corruption. He told us he hoped that something good would come out of his movement, forcing Mrs. Gandhi to initiate some reforms. I met JP several times after this, once again offering to leave my job and join him. Pleased with my persistence, he started working out the details with me.

In the beginning of October 1974, he had organised a protest march from Kadamkuan to the Secretariat in Patna. I decided to join it. Since a bandh had also been called, there was no transport available, and Pataliputra Colony was quite far from Kadamkuan. Undeterred, I decided to walk the six-kilometre distance.

As I was hurriedly getting ready in the morning, my wife asked, 'Where are you off to?'

'I am going on a very long journey,' I replied. She offered to join me. 'It is going to be a very long and arduous journey,' I warned her. But she insisted, and I had to relent. Because of the bandh we could not take the car, so I picked up a bicycle and biked toward Kadamkuan, with Nilima riding pillion. Closer to the venue, I dropped the bike at a friend's and we both walked on to join the procession at its starting point. There was hardly anyone in the crowd who recognised me, as we moved toward the Secretariat along with the procession.

JP stopped the procession just short of the Secretariat to allow the laggards to catch up. He was atop a jeep when suddenly his gaze fell on me. He beckoned me closer. As I drew near him, he asked me in Bhojpuri, '*Raua naukri chhor deni*?' (Have you left your job?), to which I cheerily replied '*Ab chhutiye jaayi*!' (I am sure I will lose it now!) He smiled back, and the procession moved on.

We blocked the main gate of the Secretariat for a while before dispersing. The protest march had made its point, and I felt a strange sense of satisfaction. I was

sure that after having participated in a political protest against the government, I would be dismissed. On the brighter side, I would then be free to work with the man I admired the most.

It was evening by the time we got back home to Pataliputra. Babuji, pacing up and down impatiently, immediately asked us where we had gone. 'We joined JP's procession! We walked from Kadamkuan to the Secretariat!' my wife said with a mix of both excitement and emotion. Babuji and Mai stared at us in shock. Finding a sympathetic audience, Nilima bitterly complained that I was once again thinking of leaving my job. Where would that leave our family? Alarmed, Babuji contacted my brothers and Ajit rushed to Patna to prevent me from taking a hasty step. As for me, I left the next steps to God, being confident that my being a part of the procession would surely lead to my dismissal from service.

Somehow, even after joining the procession, I was not served a show-cause notice by the government. Nor was I dismissed from service. I learnt later that it was because the magistrate on duty, my batchmate MC Subarna, had deliberately not reported my participation. The intelligence officers did mention my name but my friend, DN Sahay (IPS), who was then SP, Special Branch, deleted my name from the list before sending the report to his superiors. Thus, no disciplinary action was taken action against me. Well, how can one argue with fate?

Meanwhile, a huge public meeting was being planned by JP at Patna's Gandhi Maidan. He suggested that the announcement of my resignation from the IAS and joining his movement could be made at the meeting, and I began looking forward to it. However, fate intervened again. Two political leaders of Bihar, who were close to JP and knew me well, somehow got wind of my plans to leave the service. They approached JP and urged him to dissuade me from such a move. 'He has no assets and no other source of income. He cannot support his family. His children will suffer the most,' they argued.

The opinions of the two political stalwarts, Satyendra Narain Singh and Ambika Sharan Singh prevailed. JP advised me, once again not to quit at that stage. When we met, he said, 'I have come to know about your financial situation. You are entirely dependent on your salary for the upkeep of your family. If you leave your job, your family is likely to face great hardships. My advice to you, therefore, is to please wait.' He also told me something that has been my mantra throughout my political career: 'You are fully entitled to receive donations for meeting political expenditure and for fighting elections in a democracy. But you should *never* be dependent on public contributions for running your household, or for your other personal expenses.' His simple words were etched in my mind forever, and I have tried to follow them both in letter and in spirit.

My attempt to quit my job had failed again, and I left JP with a heavy heart that

day. The huge public meeting was held as scheduled. It is still remembered as one of the largest gatherings ever in Patna's Gandhi Maidan. But my own tryst with destiny had to wait.

However, my association with JP and frequent visits to his place had not gone unnoticed by the powers that be. I remember an occasion where, at an official dinner, the then Bihar deputy CM, Daroga Prasad Rai, made a loud comment targeting me, saying, 'Many officers are hobnobbing with JP. This is most objectionable. The government will soon take action against them', and then went on to add, most mischievously, '*Unko ghar jakar butru khelana hoga*.' (They will have to go home and spend time entertaining their children.)

Thus, my stay in Bihar was becoming increasingly untenable.

Delhi, again

AP Sharma was an MP from Buxar in Bihar, who had made a few trips to Frankfurt and become quite friendly with me. His younger son, Manmohan, had got a job with Air India in Frankfurt and had stayed with us as a house guest for several months till he found his own place to stay.

When AP Sharma became a Minister of State (MoS) in the Ministry of Industry in the Government of India in 1975, he insisted I join him as his special assistant. TA Pai was the cabinet minister and the large ministry had two other ministers of state. An MoS was entitled to a private secretary as well as a special assistant (SA), the SA being senior to the private secretary.

I had already reached the level of director, a post between a deputy secretary and a joint secretary in the Government of India hierarchy, making me too senior to work as a special assistant of an MoS who did not even hold an independent charge. Many of my other colleagues in the IAS, some even junior to me, were special assistants to important cabinet ministers. In the normal course of things, I would not have accepted AP Sharma's offer but, for me, times were far from normal. I had to get out of Patna to escape the wrath of the state government, of people like Daroga Prasad Rai, especially since my plan to quit the service and join JP had come to naught. I did not want to be caught off guard and be at a loose end again as I had been after my transfer from the Santhal Parganas. Family pressure

had prevailed yet again.

I accepted the minister's offer, and he succeeded in persuading both the Government of India and the Bihar government to let me return to Delhi. After less than a year in Patna, I was back in Delhi on deputation once again. In those days, 'industry' and 'commerce' fell under two different ministries. The Ministry of Industry was separate, with three different departments: the Department of Industrial Development, the Department of Heavy Industry (with a large share of major government undertakings) and the Department of Technical Development – with three different MoSs.

I do not know what my fate would have been had I continued in Patna when Emergency was imposed by prime minister Indira Gandhi on 26 June 1975. Fortunately, I was only a small cog in the wheel as special assistant to a Congress minister in Delhi and escaped attention.

AP Sharma had been given charge of small-scale industries in the ministry, among other things. PC Alexander, a distinguished civil servant with an outstanding career, was the development commissioner for SSI and worked closely with the minister. He later became principal secretary to Indira Gandhi, governor of Maharashtra and a member of Rajya Sabha. I knew him from his days as joint secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and we enjoyed a good rapport.

AP Sharma took interest in his work but was a quintessential politician and politics was his first love. He liked travelling abroad and we made several trips to foreign countries over the next two years. As for me, I was not happy working as a special assistant to an MoS. It bothered me all the time. Luckily for me, the secretary in the department of industrial development, RV Raman (IAS), an extremely competent officer, felt that my potential was being underutilised as SA to the minister. So, he gave me additional charge of the post of director, foreign investment and foreign collaborations. This came as a stroke of good luck and I enjoyed the work at this desk immensely.

The Licence-Permit-Quota Raj was at its peak in those days, making the Directorate General of Technical Development (DGTD), under the Ministry of Industry, an extremely powerful organisation. All new industries in the private sector had to get clearance from the DGTD, which also decided whether any additional capacity was needed or not.

I still remember an officer Rajgopal, merely a deputy DG in the DGTD, who was greatly sought after by all the senior officers, including secretaries to the government. This was because he was both the judge and the jury for most industries. It was becoming increasingly difficult for foreign companies, especially MNCs, to operate in India because of the stringent requirements of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), a law that was later abolished by me in my

second stint as finance minister. It was replaced by the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA).

In 1975, when the Allahabad High Court judge, Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha pronounced his landmark judgement declaring Indira Gandhi's Lok Sabha election win as null and void, my minister and I were in Geneva. Realising the importance of what had happened, AP Sharma decided to return to Delhi immediately, and I was able to secure seats for us on the first flight out of Geneva.

An interesting aside during this Geneva visit was an unexpected encounter with the redoubtable KB Lall. Once again, he had been posted as our ambassador to the European Union at Brussels, Belgium, and was on a visit to Geneva. When I learnt that he was staying in the same hotel as us, I decided to call on him. During our meeting, he confided in me his unfulfilled wish to become the governor of an important Indian state. He wanted to know whether my minister could help in the matter, and I assured him of my best efforts to bear influence on my boss, arranging for him to call on the visiting minister.

Amid our hasty departure preparations, I realised that the minister might leave without meeting KB, so I persuaded AP Sharma to spare a little time for him. He agreed, and I decided to go and personally fetch KB to meet him in the lobby of the hotel, only to find KB in his dressing gown when I called on him. Since there was no time for him to change, I escorted him, as he was, to the lobby. Upon entering the elevator car, we encountered a few ladies. 'I hope you do not mind the way I am dressed', apologised the ever-chivalrous KB. 'We are too old to mind, sweetheart!' drawled one of the ladies in an American accent. Of course, KB could not allow this to go without a rejoinder. 'If you were younger you would have minded even less,' he remarked as we reached the ground floor.

Given the extraordinary circumstances in which he met the minister, KB chose not to raise the matter of governorship and, sadly, his wish remained unfulfilled.

Interestingly, KB was known as 'khuda' (God) among the younger officers of the Ministry of Commerce but, at times, even God does not get what *He* wants. I have talked about the rivalry between Mani and me. An even more famous rivalry existed between KB Lall and another ICS officer, LK Jha. Both were joint secretaries in the then Ministry of Commerce and Industry. LK went on to occupy important posts like secretary, finance, secretary to prime minister Indira Gandhi, governor of the Reserve Bank of India, ambassador of India to the US, governor of Jammu and Kashmir and, finally, he became a member of Rajya Sabha. KB perhaps aspired to occupy all these posts but, despite his brilliance, he could not. What will you ascribe this to? Luck? Fate? Or something else?

KB was later shifted from the Ministry of Commerce to the Ministry of Defence as defence secretary soon after LN Mishra took over as commerce minister. It was

during his tenure as defence secretary that the Bangladesh war took place. The defence secretary, along with two other senior officials, used to hold daily press briefings to inform the country and the world about the progress of the war. All three of them smoked cigars and the triad soon became known as 'the cigar brigade'.

KB never lost interest in his first love—international trade—and went on to set up the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), which has gone on to become one of India's leading think tanks on economic and trade issues. It was a moment of supreme satisfaction for me when KB insisted on coming to see me in my office one day, when I was finance minister in the Chandra Shekhar government, in connection with some government grants for ICRIER. I was only too glad to oblige. He was an unforgettable gentleman, KB Lall.

My minister, of course, welcomed the Emergency and was quite enthusiastic about it. But I was greatly anguished when JP was arrested and imprisoned. I also learnt an important lesson about people's behaviour. The day JP had held his mammoth public meeting at Gandhi Maidan, where I had initially planned to join him and announce my resignation, I was on my way to Patna from Munger in a state government plane. As we flew over the city in that small plane, I noticed that every street was choked with people moving like flowing streams toward Gandhi Maidan.

The sight is firmly etched in my memory. Another sight, equally memorable, was from my visit to Patna immediately after the imposition of the Emergency. There was such fear in the minds of people that even a small group would melt away at the sight of a police vehicle. I wondered where all the support, enthusiasm, commitment and determination of the people had vanished as soon as the Emergency was imposed.

Back in Delhi, life went on as usual. I was allotted a C2-type, first-floor flat on Delhi's Shah Jahan Road. I had never lived in such a big flat in Delhi before and I remember telling Nilima that I had reached the top of my house entitlement. We had brought an air-conditioner back from Germany, a rare luxury in those days, along with other foreign gadgets like a tape recorder, record player, transistor radio and cassette player and our house was enriched with them. India's restrictive industrial regime had left the market depleted of goods ordinarily available in other countries and, as I have already mentioned, these goods were considered status symbols in those days. I had them all by then and felt I had finally arrived.

My posting in Delhi was tied to the duration of my minister's stint in the government. The day Mrs. Gandhi lost the 1977 general elections, I did not even wait for my orders. I simply packed my bags and reported to the chief secretary of Bihar for duty.

Back to Bihar

On my return to Bihar, I was appointed as the animal husbandry commissioner, which was completely out of sync with my earlier jobs in the ministries of commerce and industry. But this is how governments work. In fact, when I was posted in Germany, people I met naturally thought that I belonged to the diplomatic service. If the issue ever came up, I would hasten to add that I belonged to the home civil service instead. I would further explain that the nature of my service was such that while today I was working abroad on a diplomatic assignment, tomorrow I might be asked to look after the development of livestock. I never realised then that it might really happen one day!

In Patna, we settled back in our house in Rajendra Nagar. It had been under construction during my days in Delhi and only the ground floor was ready by the time we got back to Patna. Yet it was comfortable, with three bedrooms and an office-room. At that, time, my parents and sick older brother were staying with Bijay in Hazaribagh where he was posted as Conservator of Forests.

My parents were glad that I had returned to Patna, as they preferred to stay with me whenever possible. Patna was home to them, and full of relatives and friends, so they were happier staying there rather than anywhere else. They were also comfortable with my wife who was only too glad to hand over the reins of the household to my mother, unlike other housewives who liked to retain control.

My yellow Fiat had not reached Patna from Delhi yet, as it was coming by train, so I decided to undertake a trip to Hazaribagh in the office jeep. There was some important official work I wanted to attend to, in and around Hazaribagh, as well as bring my parents to Patna. It was already the beginning of June and the weather had become extremely hot, but my father decided to accompany me to Patna in the jeep, nevertheless. Though we left Hazaribagh in the morning, the weather had an adverse effect on him. By the time we reached Koderma, in about 90 minutes, he was already on the verge of collapse.

We stopped at the Forest Rest House at Koderma to rest. As it was only getting hotter, we decided to continue our journey to Patna. We tried to protect him from the hot winds in whatever way we could. While my mother did not suffer as much, Babuji could barely move by the time we reached Patna. We carried him to his bed

and tended to him as best we could, but he never really recovered from the rigours of that journey. His condition deteriorated further, and he was admitted to the Patna Medical College hospital where he breathed his last after about ten days.

It was the first death in our family and came as a huge shock to all of us. Though Babuji had not built a house of his own, many people told me that it must have been a matter of great comfort for him that his last rites were performed from his son's own house. We often had our differences, the major one relating to my quitting the service, but he had always been a pillar of strength for me and his loss was irreparable. Honour, courage and self-respect are the uncompromising ideals I have imbibed directly from him, and for that I will always be grateful.

CHAPTER 11

TWO CMs, A JOURNEY AND A LOSS

The transfer back to Patna was inconvenient from the point of view of our children's education. We decided that Sharmila and Jayant, who were now in high school where stability was important, would continue their studies at CJM and St. Columba's, respectively, and stay back with my parents-in-law in Delhi. My father-in-law had retired after his last official posting as executive director, Asian Development Bank, and was back from Manila. He now lived in his own, fairly-large house in Vasant Vihar, where our children could stay. Sumant, only twelve at the time, came along with us and was admitted into St. Michael's High School in Patna.

Nilima used her free time to good effect, taking up teaching at the Notre Dame Academy, Patna's premier girls' school. She also took up writing for children in earnest. Her first book was submitted for a national competition organised by the Children's Book Trust, the pioneer publisher of children's books in India. It was a matter of immense pride for all of us when her mystery-adventure story, 'The Chandipur Jewels'—an Enid Blyton-style tale set in Bihar—won the first prize. I came to Delhi on a visit, and to the Children's' Book Trust to receive the prize on her behalf. I remember meeting the legendary cartoonist Shanker of *Shanker's Weekly* fame, who had founded the publishing house. It was an unforgettable experience. I guess, in today's terms, this would be akin to my cricket-crazy grandsons Aashir and Siddhant meeting MS Dhoni.

Nilima went on to pen many more popular books for children that, fortunately, kept her occupied while I was busy. More importantly, she became president of an association consisting of authors, illustrators and all those interested in promoting reading and in producing good books for children. More accolades continued to come her way.

At the time of my return, Bihar still had a Congress government, headed by

Jagannath Mishra. But after the assembly elections in 1977, it was soon replaced by a Janata Party government and Karpoori Thakur became the chief minister of the state. One day, I got a call from the chief secretary, Sharan Singh, asking me whether I would like to work as principal secretary to the CM. Two other officers were also under consideration for the job, he told me. I did not know Karpoori Thakur at all, but the job was full of interesting possibilities.

Sharan Singh had warned me about Karpoori being a highly disorganised person, saying that I'd have to work hard to bring some method to his madness. I agreed, also because the animal husbandry department hardly excited me. My IAS colleagues were quite enthused when they heard about the offer. The CM chose me for the job and the proposal soon got the state Cabinet's nod. In those days, all senior appointments were required to be approved by the Cabinet.

On receiving my transfer orders, I decided to call on Karpoori Thakur at his office in the Old Secretariat in Patna. It was bursting at the seams with people, and when I asked a harried staff member whether I could see the CM, he enquired rudely, 'Why do you want to meet him?' When I mentioned my name to him, his attitude suddenly changed, and he respectfully led me to the CM's room, which was equally crowded. It was only after some tricky acrobatics that I could catch Karpoori's eye.

I had also been duly warned that he did not like English, like many of his colleagues. So, I introduced myself to him in chaste Hindi, '*Mera naam* Yashwant Sinha *hai aur main hi aapka pradhan sachiv niyukt hua hoon*.' (My name is Yashwant Sinha and I have been appointed as your principal secretary.) He looked at me, almost as if to console me, and mumbled, '*Koi baat nahin*.' (It's okay.)

The frosty reception I received, thankfully, did not turn out to be a sign of the times ahead. Not only did I enjoy my new role, the posting brought Karpoori Thakur and me very close to each other over time.

The CM's Secretariat was housed separately in an outhouse of what was then called the Industrial Guest House, at No. 1, Desh Ratna Marg. It was earlier called King George's Avenue and connected Raj Bhawan to the Secretariat. It was, and still is, a beautiful drive, with amaltas (laburnum) trees on either side. Also known as the golden rain tree, the trees give the impression of being aflame with their yellow flowers when in bloom.

The CM's Secretariat had a spacious room for the principal secretary, but none for the chief minister himself. When Karpoori Thakur came to the Secretariat, he would operate from my room, sit on my chair and use my desk.

The two years I spent with him and the year with Ram Sundar Das, who replaced him as CM in 1979, were very different from all that I had experienced in the civil service earlier, including my stint with AP Sharma. The CM's Secretariat

job had a strong political side to it, and the principal secretary was the primary interface between the CM and the bureaucracy. On the one hand, I had to interpret the chief minister's thinking to the bureaucracy and, on the other, the thoughts and ideas of the bureaucracy to the CM. His Cabinet colleagues, however, felt as if I was one of them and often confided in me, even on political matters. Some even relied on me to convey messages to the CM.

I soon realised that the job also offered me an opportunity to influence important decisions of the government. Many looked upon this post as the second-most important one after that of the chief secretary, but the incumbent's influence depended on proximity to the CM and the confidence he enjoyed—quite simply, on whether you had his ear or not.

Karpoori Thakur visited Delhi soon after I had taken over. His trip had a mainly political agenda, that of consulting the PM and other party colleagues on the expansion of the state Cabinet, so I did not accompany him. A few senior Cabinet ministers had already been sworn in. Besides, having been away from Bihar during my seven years in the Ministry of Commerce and two in the Ministry of Industry, I was a little out of touch with Bihar politics and politicians. I had some catching up to do.

During the CM's absence, I decided to call on a few ministers. I first called on Kapil Deo Singh, a firebrand socialist leader whom I already knew from before, and one of the senior-most ministers in the government. Singh had also been a minister in the Mahamaya Prasad Sinha government of 1967. He had visited Dumka immediately after my face-off with the CM and asked me to see him at the Circuit House. Despite his reputation as a hothead, he had been extremely polite and considerate towards me and had assured me that, on his return to Patna, he would take up my case with Karpoori Thakur.

Since I had left Bihar and taken up a post at the Centre, the outcome of this meeting was not of any great immediate interest to me. Some people told me later, however, that the Dumka incident had influenced Karpoori Thakur in selecting me for the job of his principal secretary. Apparently, he felt that only an essentially honest and upright officer would have the courage to argue with the CM. Karpoori himself was renowned for his honesty and integrity and, naturally, wanted people of the same mettle to work with him.

Kapil Deo Singh and I generally discussed the tasks before the new government in our first meeting. It was when I was calling on another senior minister, Anup Lal Yadav, that we received the sad news of Ambika Sharan Singh's demise, who had also been camping in Delhi. Out of all the Bihar politicians, I was probably closest to him and the news of his death came as a huge personal shock. I immediately returned to my office and spoke to the CM. The state government plane was

promptly sent to bring Singh's body to Patna, accompanied by Karpoori himself, where he was given a befitting state funeral.

Ambika had belonged to the Congress (O) faction of the Janata Party, and had been in Delhi for negotiations on the appointment of the rest of the state ministers. I had been looking forward to working with him, being sure that he would be made a Cabinet minister with an important portfolio. His death was a personal loss to me.

The rest of the ministers were soon sworn in and Karpoori started concentrating on governance. He was a thoroughly disorganised man, indeed. A true mass leader, he was almost always surrounded by people and found little time for official work. My main job, therefore, was to catch hold of him and force him to dispose of official files, which was easier said than done.

During one of our trips to Delhi, I advised him to organise his time better, in the interest of better governance.

He agreed and asked me to work out a daily schedule for him, which I did with complete sincerity, even bringing a cassette player for him to listen to bhajans in the morning. He looked at the draft schedule and approved it in toto, which was then published in the newspapers for the information of all and sundry. Much to my dismay, Karpoori himself turned out to be the biggest violator of my painstakingly-crafted schedule, right from day one!

Realising that he would not be amenable to any form of discipline, we decided to just whisk him away for a few hours every day instead, during which he could attend to important files. We would usually go to some obscure Dak Bungalow or rest house near Patna, late in the evening. If our location was discovered by those who chased him, we would simply abandon it and move to a new one. Once there, I would present the files to him and he would either record his minutes on them, the draft of which I would have prepared in advance, or simply sign them to approve the proposals they contained. Our preferred hideout was the guest house of the 5th Unit of the Bihar Military Police in Phulwari Sharif near Patna because it was under police security, which could not be easily breached.

My job in the CM's Secretariat was extremely demanding and kept me very busy. I left home early in the morning and returned late at night. The evenings were unpredictable as we would leave only after Karpoori fell asleep. I would present a file to Karpoori, only to realise, suddenly, that he had already dozed off. To those of us present in the room, this was a signal to wind up and leave him in the care of the rest house staff.

Since he wore a dhoti and kurta, he did not have to change before going out. It took us a lot of effort to trace his location all over again and to make sure he kept his appointments for the day.

I must say that our Houdini acts, with a well-meaning but errant CM in tow, no

less, were a rather unique experience.

An added advantage as principal secretary to CM was that I was allotted a double-storeyed independent house on Bailey Road, which I would not have got had I only been a secretary to the government. As the Secretariat was not too far, I liked to cycle to work. Today, officers of JS-level and above are all entitled to a staff car. Even Nilima's father, as secretary to GoI, did not have a staff car in those days and I remember always driving myself to office in Delhi as well.

Karpoori had a wife, two sons and a daughter. The children stayed with him in Patna but he made sure that they remained invisible. His wife lived in the village. I had heard several stories of his early life and was keen to visit his village and see for myself the conditions in which his wife lived. One day, along with his private secretary Lakshmi Prasad Sahu, I made the trip to his village in Samastipur district. I was introduced to Mrs. Thakur and she was happy to see me, even though there was no chair for me to sit on. We made ourselves comfortable in whichever way we could.

She insisted I have a cup of tea and, as we hung around, she lit a wood fire to heat the water. The house itself was a thatched hut with absolutely no trappings of modernity or comfort. The family lived in the village with a bare minimum of worldly possessions. I can't help but compare this with the palaces of politicians that are built in record time now, as soon as they become an MLA or an MP.

I had also heard several stories about how Karpoori had been treated shabbily as a child, by the upper-caste village landlords. One of these tales was narrated to me by Karpoori himself, at the height of the tension that prevailed after he had introduced reservation in government jobs for the backward classes. He told me how he had always been a bright student and how, after he had passed his matriculation examination in the first division, his father had proudly taken him to the village landlord's home to inform him about Karpoori's achievement.

The landlord, after feigning happiness at this, told the young Karpoori haughtily, 'Very good. I am happy at your achievement. Now come and press my legs.' Karpoori, being the gentleman he was, did not get upset and did indeed press the landlord's legs. Even later, he used to step in for his barber father when needed, to shave people's beards or to cut their hair.

Despite all the humiliation he had suffered in his early life, Karpoori was remarkably free of any rancour for the upper castes. His choice of me as his principal secretary was proof of this. The reservation that he introduced for the backward classes and, within that, another special reservation for the extremely backward classes, was not born out of any prejudice. Instead, it was to help the backward classes live with respect and dignity in society.

Without doubt, Karpoori was one of the greatest men in Indian politics during

his time.

The chief secretary, Sharan Singh, was transferred to Delhi as secretary to Government of India soon after I was appointed as principal secretary to Karpoori, so we started looking for his replacement. Karpoori told me that he wanted an outstanding officer who was also completely honest, a rare combination indeed. PS Appu, who fit the bill admirably, was one of the officers under consideration. One day we had gone to Raj Bhawan to meet the governor and as we were leaving, Karpoori suddenly decided he wanted to go to Appu's house and talk to him.

Appu lived nearby and we arrived there unannounced, catching him by surprise. Once we had settled down, Karpoori said to Appu, almost in a pleading manner, 'Appu saheb, I have come to ask you to accept the post of chief secretary.' Appu was even more surprised at this, but quickly composed himself and replied, 'I have no objection, sir. But I have a few conditions.' His first condition was that he was not to be disturbed on a holiday, not even on the telephone, unless there was an emergency. He also said that he would not be subjected to any pressure either by the CM or his ministers and that he be allowed to express his views frankly.

Karpoori accepted both his conditions rather meekly and Appu was appointed the chief secretary of Bihar. However, he did not complete his full term and left for a GoI posting after only a year and a half. Karpoori selected another senior IAS officer who was considered equally honest, KA Ramasubramanian, to replace him. He was on deputation to the Centre, but soon returned to take up his post at Patna.

PS Appu was a much-celebrated IAS officer and it was a pleasure working with him while he was the chief secretary. So it was with Ramasubramanian.

My experience in Dumka was still fresh in my memory, which made me keen to ensure that no honest officer should suffer the same humiliation that I had. Karpoori himself was a thorough gentleman and treated his officers with respect and consideration but the same could not be said of the other ministers in his Cabinet. I remember one occasion when a certain minster was on tour, during which he arrived at an inspection bungalow without prior notice. He wanted to occupy Room 1, a better accommodation than the others. But the commissioner of Patna Division, GS Grewal, a 1957 batch IAS officer, was already occupying the room and refused to vacate it for the minister.

The minister returned to Patna and angrily complained about the commissioner to Karpoori, insisting on his immediate transfer. The minister belonged to the Jan

Sangh faction of the Janata Party, a very important part of the government politically, and Karpoori could not afford to ignore his demand. I was unhappy about the turn of events but could not do much, given the circumstances. I called Grewal and told him 'My friend, the fight between a civil servant and a minister is always an unequal one and, therefore, it is always the officer who suffers, like I did at Dumka. Yet, we should never compromise on public interest and on our dignity and self-respect. Please be ready for a transfer.' In fact, this is the advice I have given to generations of officers, whenever I have interacted with them at the Academy in Mussoorie and elsewhere.

As principal secretary to the CM, I used to attend cabinet meetings along with the chief secretary and the deputy secretary in the state's cabinet secretariat. Other officers were called in as and when needed. Transfer and posting proposals of officers, of the rank of district magistrate or SP and above, were supposed to be approved by the Cabinet.

So, Grewal's transfer proposal also came to the Cabinet for approval. The proposal was to transfer Grewal as MD of the Lift Irrigation Corporation of Bihar, decidedly a less important post than that of commissioner of Patna division. The minister, who was still angry with Grewal, was not satisfied and told Karpoori bluntly, 'Karpooriji, you had promised that he would be given a corridor posting and not a regular posting.' This meant being put on the waitlist for a posting. In the stunned silence that followed, I gathered enough courage to say, 'There is no posting called corridor posting, Sir. How can the Cabinet pass an order that is not legally valid?' My intervention saved the day for Grewal, the proposed posting was approved, and he was duly transferred.

Cabinet meetings in Bihar were fascinating affairs. Apart from a sumptuous *nashta* of *samosa* and *gulab jamun* from the Secretariat canteen, the discussions in the Cabinet were also very interesting. Postings and transfers of officers occupied pride of place and took up a lot of time. Officers were favoured, depending on their caste, by ministers belonging to the same caste. Thakur Prasad, father of Ravi Shankar Prasad, who was a senior cabinet minister in-charge of the department of Industry, had once jokingly suggested that these proposals should also mention the caste of the officer.

My batchmate, CR Venkatraman, who was secretary, personnel, once told a minister that the character-roll dossiers of officers should be maintained in distinct colours for different castes so that they could be easily identified by ministers who wanted their own caste men to be appointed in their departments. Such was the reality of Bihar in those days. Alas, this is true even today and not only confined to Bihar.

In fact, despite there being a permanent civil service, the 'spoils' system that's

prevalent in the US has also become common in our country. This explains the large-scale transfers of civil servants every time a new political regime comes into office. It has become rampant in state governments and even the Government of India is not immune to it now. I did not suffer on this account for the simple reason that I believed in doing my work sincerely and efficiently and my efforts were to remain strictly equidistant from all politicians. As a result, I was never branded as belonging to one political group or another. I could easily move from Karpoori Thakur to his arch-rival and successor Ram Sunder Das and from him to the Congress's AP Sharma in Delhi.

In Cabinet meetings, however, the transfer and posting proposals would often lead to heated arguments among the ministers and create unpleasant scenes. On the other hand, serious matters like Bihar's five-year plan document or the memorandum to the Finance Commission would often be passed in a jiffy, without discussion.

The drawer of my office desk was full of resignation letters, written by some minister or the other after a Cabinet meeting. The angry and disappointed ministers would often follow me to my office after a meeting of the Cabinet and ask for a blank sheet of paper.

I would ask them to forgive and forget but they would say, '*Bahut ho gaya. Ab bardasht nahin hota hai*, Jaswant Babu (this is how many people pronounced my name). *Isteefa dene ke alava, mere paas koi vikalp nahin hai*.' (I've had enough and can't tolerate it any longer. There is no alternative now, except for me to resign). Reluctantly, I would give them a piece of paper on which they would write a brief resignation letter and leave it with me for the CM. They were not serious, of course. But then, nor was I. After a few of these episodes, I even stopped mentioning them to the CM as, after a day or two, the ministers' anger would subside, and things would go back to normal again. When I left the CM's Secretariat, I personally destroyed all these resignation letters.

Karpoori could be brilliant when he chose to be, and equally scathing in his comments. He was a great votary of Hindi and all the official work during his time was done in that language, though his English was without blemish. One day we came across a file in which the deputy secretary of the law department, whose mother tongue was not Hindi, had valiantly tried to write a note in Hindi. He had, however, used a fair amount of English words as well.

Karpoori sent the file back with a cryptic note of his own, 'Hindi *mein achha Angrezi* note *likha hai*.' (You have written a nice English note in Hindi.) Erring on the side of caution, I did not even write any English words on my notepad that I used to carry with me all the time, fearing that Karpoori might see them. Every communication to the ministers of GoI, including the PM, was in Hindi,

accompanied by an unsigned English translation.

Karpoori soon emerged as a leader and spokesperson of the backward and poorer states of India during discussions in Delhi. The CMs of these states would often meet in Bihar Bhawan to finalise their stand on important issues, especially those relating to the allocation of funds by the Centre. I remember one meeting of the National Development Council in Delhi, especially, where the finance minister of Haryana had, in his speech, made the point that Haryana was a better-off state because of the hard work put in by its people. He asserted that Bihar and other states were poor because the people of those states were not as hardworking. He strongly criticised the approach of the poorer states, arguing that they should not be rewarded for their failures, just as the affluent states should not be punished for their hard work.

Obviously, we were all cut to the quick by this line of argument. Karpoori Thakur vanished during the lunch break without telling any of us where he was going. When the meeting resumed, he was still missing and just as I was starting to worry, I saw him enter the hall with a peon in tow. The peon was carrying several books. Karpoori asked for the floor, and referring to the books that he had collected, tried to prove how the people of the eastern states were equally hardworking but were at a disadvantage because they had been punished by the British, especially in terms of irrigation facilities and other infrastructure, for their role during the First War of Independence.

He went on to explain how Punjab and Haryana had been favoured because they had sided with the British. He quoted copiously from the various books he had brought and left his rivals speechless with his erudite and well-informed intervention. At the end of the day, I remember everyone, especially from the backward states, crowding around him to congratulate him.

Similarly, in a meeting with the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, he told an officer of the Planning Commission, who was arguing rather loudly on its behalf, ‘If you were serving in a state government you would be arguing the case of the state government equally strongly.’ Then he turned to the deputy chairman and told him rather bluntly, ‘Your wisdom comes from these officers whose arguments are based not so much on merit but on loyalty to the government they serve under.’

Quite early in my tenure with Karpoori, we had come to Delhi to meet prime

minister Morarji Desai and other ministers of his government. When we entered the PM's Safdarjung residence, we were received with due courtesy and taken to a waiting room. The place was very peaceful—birds chirped in the garden, there were no waiting crowds, and everything seemed extremely orderly. At the appointed time, we were ushered into the PM's office where we had our meeting with him.

I was very impressed and told Karpoori as we came out, 'Sir, this is the residence of the prime minister of India. Did you notice the peace and quiet, the order, and especially the absence of crowds? Why can't we have the same order in Patna?' Karpoori's reply, part of an Urdu couplet from a well-known Mughal-era poet, left me speechless. He said, 'Yashwant babu, *ant samay kya khaak musalman honge*?'[1]

Being the iconoclast that he was, this one statement summed him up beautifully.

Karpoori's socialist thinking led him to nationalise the sugar mills of Bihar. The operation had to be conducted in great secrecy so that the mill owners would not get time to strip the mills of their assets or challenge the order in the state's High Court. I made the necessary arrangements with the help of a handful of concerned officials, ensuring that the preparations were kept confidential. Teams were kept ready in Patna to take over the mills as soon as the notification was issued late in the evening. Nobody had any inkling of the move until the appointed hour when the notification was issued, and the mills taken over. In the process, the CM had taken on people with powerful vested interests who, predictably, turned against him after this move.

The reservation for the other backward classes (OBCs) was also done with a great deal of finesse, and without it leading to any violence. There were some expected protests, no doubt, but the administration was fully prepared to meet the challenge. The media, however, made much of the small and isolated disturbances. I remember how, one day, an American journalist walked into my office with all kinds of camera equipment and demanded to know where the war zone was. I dismissed him by saying that there was no war zone and that he would not be able to get a story out of Bihar.

Some political decisions often had a direct impact on the administration itself, like when prohibition was introduced in Bihar in 1977 under the direction of prime minister Morarji Desai. The minister for excise, Baidyanath Mehta, instructed the excise commissioner Abhimanyu Singh to transfer all the excise superintendents posted in Patna out of the city as he was not satisfied with their work. Despite Abhimanyu Singh's reservations, the minister's orders were carried out, leading to a huge protest by the concerned officers.

One of the officers was politically very well connected and used his influence to pressurise the CM to undo the transfers. The officers did not want to take on the minister and laid all the blame on the excise commissioner Abhimanyu Singh instead. Finally, a compromise was arrived at and Singh was shunted out from his post. However, Baidyanath Mehta was unhappy at the compromise and resigned from the government.

The state Assembly was in session at the time and Mehta decided to use his privilege as an MLA to make a statement in the Assembly. The speaker permitted him to do so as the first item on the agenda. An uproar was sure to follow, and we also suspected that Mehta might make some personal comments against Karpoori. The CM had to be ready with a reply. He asked me to anticipate what Mehta might say and prepare a reply. 'Yashwant *babu*, *bahut achha jawab taiyaar keejiye*,' (prepare a very good response). It was a difficult position to defend but I promised to do my best.

It was already late in the evening, so I went home to have a bite before returning to the CM's Secretariat where we worked throughout the night. At about 2 am, Karpoori paid a visit to the office and was impressed to see us working diligently. I told him I was waiting for some information from the excise department and that the draft reply would be ready by about 6 am, which is when he could return to look at it. I also advised him to go home and rest, given that he would have a difficult day ahead, only for him to thump his chest and say, 'Yashwant *babu*, *abhi bahut jaan baki hai*.' (There's still a lot of life left in me.) Such was his spirit. I later remembered these words when he died, and I saw him lying motionless in his house in Patna. The best of us have to yield to death.

As expected, Karpoori gave a strong reply to the excise minister's charges in the Assembly and made the best of a difficult situation. But all the hullabaloo that had been created made Karpoori refrain from bringing the politically-well-connected excise superintendent back to Patna.

By this time, Karpoori was under pressure from his detractors in politics, including from within his own party. A certain lady from Nepal had even accused him of raping her during her visit to Patna. So, Karpoori undertook a five day fast, which was meant as a reply to his detractors, choosing the Gandhi Sangrahalaya, across from the Gandhi Maidan, to do so. It was unusual, to say the least, for an incumbent CM to undertake a fast like this and it created quite a stir in those days.

He was inundated with visitors who came to congratulate him on his unique gesture and pledge their unflinching support. The fast was an enormous success, politically, but it only added to the pending work in the CMs Secretariat. I told Karpoori about it and suggested that he would have to vanish, this time for a few days, to dispose of the work. The doctors attending to him also suggested that he

take things easy for a few days after his fast.

Since it was impossible to do so in Patna, or at any place close by, we decided to go to Balmiki Nagar near the Nepal border, which had a reservoir and a beautiful guest house of the irrigation department. We flew there in the state government plane with huge bundles of files and stayed there for three days. While Karpoori recuperated, we worked on the files and I returned to Patna with the satisfaction of a job well done.

Like in most things, Karpoori had a most unique style of eating as well. He enjoyed non-vegetarian food and the tiffin carrier, which brought home-cooked food for him, would often have fish and chicken as well. He never mixed one dish with another, not even rice with dal. He would eat each dish separately, often polishing off the last grain of rice or the very last bite of roti and, after having chicken or fish, would leave the bones neatly on the plate. He often joked that anyone who saw him eating would start feeling hungry all over again, even if fully satiated.

In the meantime, politics in Delhi was in quite a flux. The Janata Party was coming apart. Since Karpoori was aware of my personal relationship with JP, he often sent me to meet him on his behalf and seek his guidance on some issue or the other. In one such meeting, I told JP about these political developments. 'The Janata Party is your creation. You should save it from breaking up,' I said, only to have JP reply with, 'Power is a strong glue. That will keep them together.'

How wrong he was.

It was amid all this churning that Karpoori decided to pre-empt his detractors within the party, once again, by seeking a vote of confidence from the Janata Party legislators. The meeting of the Legislature Party was held in Sadaqat Ashram. To his great surprise, Karpoori lost the vote. He came to the CM's secretariat straight from the meeting and asked me to draft a letter of resignation addressed to the state's governor. He was crestfallen, as was I.

While the letter was being typed, I told him that instead of asking for a vote of confidence, he should have challenged his detractors to bring a vote of no-confidence against him, which might have produced a different outcome, to which Karpoori replied, 'Why didn't you tell me this before?' To this, I said, 'Because, sir, political advice is not within my domain.' Following this unfortunate outcome, he was keen to dispose of all pending files. I suggested that while he should continue to clear routine files until a new CM was appointed, he should not take any policy decisions. Karpoori followed my advice.

His resignation marked the end of an era in the history of Bihar. Despite his dishevelled appearance and disorganised schedule, Karpoori Thakur was an outstanding CM. He was honest to the core and that honesty wasn't just limited to

him personally. He kept his eyes open for corruption anywhere in his government and did not hesitate in dealing with political corruption either. In fact, there were many cases where he disciplined ministers, often on my advice. He also supported his officers fully and led by example. I remember him telling some of them, during an anti-encroachment drive in Patna, 'If I take one step, I expect you to take three.'

Working with Karpoori Thakur remains one of the most unforgettable and cherished experiences of my life.

The Pilgrim's Progress

Working with Karpoori was also immensely challenging. As I have mentioned, it was a round-the-clock job and, after working with him for over a year, I had a strong urge to get away from it all, at least for a few days. I knew I could not approach him and say that I needed to go on a holiday, just like that. Being a very hardworking person himself, he was unlikely to appreciate the idea. The excuse to take leave for a few days, however, came purely by accident.

My friend, Shyamnarain Singh of Jehanabad, came to visit me one day and casually mentioned that, as the month of 'sawan' was approaching, he planned to go to Baba Baidyanath Dham (in Deoghar) on foot, from Sultanganj, a distance of about hundred kilometres, carrying a 'kanwar'. A kanwar is a piece of split bamboo, with two pots at opposite ends, balanced on the pilgrim's shoulder, to carry the holy water to be offered to lord Shiva. His friends from the village would also accompany him, he said.

As deputy commissioner of Santhal Parganas, the district in which Deoghar was located, I was aware of the practice of 'kanwariyas' carrying holy Ganga water from Sultanganj in Bhagalpur district, all the way to Deoghar. They would then pour the water on the Shiva Linga in the famous temple there. On an impulse, I told Shyamnarain that I too would accompany him this time.

A few days later Shyamnarain visited me again. He said that the group from the village was planning to undertake the yatra in a week's time and that if I was serious about joining them I should start preparing. I made further inquiries and learnt that the distance had to be covered barefoot. I also needed to buy the special saffron-coloured dress for the trip, as well as a 'kanwar' to carry the water. I must

say, I was a little hesitant when I learnt that the *yatra* had to be undertaken barefoot. It was at this stage that my mother intervened, saying, 'You cannot go back on your word once you have taken a *sankalp* (vow) to undertake the trip.' Her intervention settled the issue, and I told Shyamnarain to count me in.

My mind made up, I informed Karpoori that I needed a week's leave to go on the trip. I knew that since it was a religious pilgrimage, there was no way he would object. Once he gave me the clearance, I started looking for friends I could rope in for the journey. I spoke to BP Verma, an IAS officer of the 1962 batch and a close friend, as well as Bhagwan, Keshav, Nandan and Raman, my friends from school, and persuaded them to join me on the pilgrimage. Verma, in turn, persuaded an officer of the Bihar commercial taxes department, CD Prasad, to join us. Thus, apart from Shyamnarain and about twenty of his friends, our own group consisted of six members.

While Shyamnarain and Co. proceeded to Sultanpur by train, we drove there in two cars. Since there were two senior IAS officers in our group, the local administration was duly informed about our visit. We stayed the night in a government rest house in Sultanpur where Shyamnarain joined us. I remember waking up excitedly the next morning but proceeding to the Ganga ghat much later than most pilgrims. In fact, we spent a leisurely morning drinking tea and doing our chores and, despite Shyamnarain's exhortations to hurry up, took our own time getting ready. It was already 11 o'clock when we finally took our bath in the river, filled up our pots with holy water and, after putting the kanwar on our shoulders, commenced the long walk to Baba Dham, bubbling with enthusiasm.

The special importance of the Ganga at Sultanpur is that it is 'uttar mukhi' (flowing in the northerly direction), as opposed to flowing south and east, as it generally does. Wherever the Ganga flows northwards, as it does in Haridwar or in Varanasi, the place is treated as sacred.

We were full of enthusiasm, initially, making us indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd. Everyone was dressed in saffron clothes, carrying a 'kanwar' and shouting the same slogan—'Bol bum!'—praising Lord Shiva. Full of energy, there was a spring in our steps. Our first destination was supposed to be a place called Tarapur, eighteen kilometres away from Sultanganj. We soon realised the inherent difficulty in walking barefoot, especially for us 'softies'. Walking on the pitch road was easier because it was smoother, but our more experienced friends informed us that it would soon lead to blisters. Walking by the side of the road had its own problems as it meant walking on uneven surfaces, as well as on little stones and pebbles that hurt.

Our enthusiasm soon started to wane, and our cries of 'Bol bum!' became less and less audible and blisters seemed to appear as if out of nowhere. Fatigue soon

overtook our enthusiasm and it was with great difficulty that we reached a place called Asarganj, about 13 kilometres from Sultanganj, where we settled down in the dak bungalow for the night. There was no way in which we could have covered the remaining distance to Tarapur that day.

The appearance of blisters and muscular pain all over the body demoralised us immensely, as we realised that we were hardly able to continue further on bare feet. The six of us from Patna decided that we would perform the rest of the journey by car instead. We apprised Shyamnarain and his friends of our intention. They tried to persuade us to continue, and even suggested we walk slowly and in a more leisurely fashion but failed to convince us. They made one last attempt early the next morning at 4 a.m., but at that hour, we were hardly in a mood to listen. Failing to persuade us, they proceeded on their own. We promptly went back to bed and slept on till late in the morning.

Our bodies ached, and the blisters hurt badly upon waking. We had our cups of tea and asked the caretaker of the Dak Bungalow to prepare us a good breakfast of eggs and toast. The caretaker—a Muslim, incidentally—could not take it anymore. He reminded us of the 'sankalp' we had taken in the lap of mother Ganga. How could we then violate that pledge, merely 24 hours later, by indulging in the sinful act of eating eggs? Not only did he refuse to cook the eggs, he also urged us to continue our journey, however slowly, while asking Lord Shiva to help us. This sermon, from our Muslim caretaker no less, shamed and surprised us. After he left, we talked it over and resolved to resume the journey on foot.

There are numerous examples of the kind I have quoted above in most of our collective experiences as Indians.

Duly chastised, we resumed the journey on foot and it was with great difficulty that we covered the five-kilometre distance to Tarapur, where we were advised to rest for the night, and to apply some paste made of ground local flowers on our blisters that helped soothe our feet.

After a good night's rest at Tarapur we felt better and enthusiastically resumed our journey on the third day. The blisters burst open on the way, but by now we were beyond care and managed to complete the difficult part of the journey through Suiya Pahad (Needle Mountain)—aptly named because of the pointed stones on the path. After this, there was no stopping us and we spent three more nights on the way before finally reaching Baba Dham. There we duly offered the holy water to Lord Shiva. Shyamnarain, who was waiting for us at Deoghar, was extremely happy to see that we had completed the journey on foot.

I must say, though, that the experience of our first pilgrimage to Baba Dham was a mixed one. At the end of it, we felt that it was not worth a repeat performance but when the month of 'sawan' approached again the following year,

the urge to undertake the pilgrimage overwhelmed us all over again. I performed the pilgrimage for five years continuously and learnt many lessons along the way.

Apart from the Indian brand of secularism demonstrated by the Muslim caretaker at Asarganj, I also learnt the value of humility. One day, tired to the bone, I was walking alone and quite slowly. It was already evening, and darkness was about to descend. Many of my friends had gone ahead while some were lagging behind. We had planned to cover a longer distance that day, but a mid-day review convinced us that, given our speed, we would not reach our destination in time.

So, we changed our plans and decided to stay at another place that was about seven to eight kilometres short of the original destination. As I was trudging along I heard a voice call out to me from behind, 'How far are you going, bum?' I wanted to impress the person who had asked me the question so, instead of mentioning the name of our actual destination, which was closer, I boasted, 'I will go up to place X' (our original destination).

As I uttered those boastful words, the person from behind overtook me. Written boldly at the back of the vest he wore were the words, 'DAK BUM.' It was only then that I realised the folly of the lie I had uttered. A 'dak bum' is a person who is supposed to complete the over-hundred-kilometre journey within 24 hours. He is not supposed to stop anywhere and must keep walking until the journey is complete. Naturally, such a pilgrim is treated with a great deal of respect.

Humility trumps hubris, every time.

On my return to Patna, when Karpoori Thakur asked me how the pilgrimage had gone, I summed it up in one sentence: 'The administration was conspicuous by its absence.' I then suggested that we should build modern 'dharamshalas' (a building devoted to religious or charitable purposes, especially a rest house for travellers), with all the requisite facilities. My suggestions included building police posts at regular intervals, throughout the route, as well as improving the walking trails by putting enough soft soil on top. Karpoori accepted my suggestion and I asked Arun Pathak (IAS) who was commissioner of the Bhagalpur division to send us a detailed proposal, which he did.

My fellow pilgrim, BP Verma, who was special secretary in the finance department, ensured its quick approval and the proposal was subsequently brought to the Cabinet and approved. Some ministers did raise the issue of secularism and whether it was wise on the part of the government to spend a considerable sum of money to facilitate the pilgrimage of a specific religious denomination, but these objections were overruled by Karpoori Thakur himself—the quintessential secular socialist.

The seven or eight fully-equipped dharmashalas en route the Baba Dham

pilgrimage today are the result of the initiative I took after my first trip there. It is matters like these that leave me with a warm sense of accomplishment from my days in the bureaucracy, and later in politics, where I have changed things for the better. Especially where my decisions or actions have left an impact on the lives of ordinary people.

Ram Sundar Das

Karpoori Thakur was succeeded by Ram Sundar Das in April 1979, also a socialist, who won the CM's chair with the support of the Jana Sangh and the Congress (O) factions of the Janata Party. I called on him after his swearing-in and apprised him of the immediate tasks awaiting the new government.

Compared to Karpoori, who was always in a hurry, Das was easy-going, accustomed to eating *paan* and rarely in a hurry. Soon after he took over, rumours surfaced that he was going to replace me. The problem he faced, however, was that each leading faction within the Janata Party that had supported and made him CM —especially the Jana Sangh and the Congress (O), which had all merged into the Janata Party in 1977—had their own candidate for the post. Days went by and Das could not make up his mind. Therefore, nothing happened. In the meantime, a communal riot broke out in Jamshedpur.

Jagjivan Ram, who was the Union defence minister, decided to visit Jamshedpur and Das decided to accompany him in his plane. I also went along, and it was during this visit that he called me to his room at the Circuit House and asked me to continue doing my work without fear, while clarifying that he had no wish to replace me. That was the end to all the uncertainty that had followed the change of guard and I continued as the new CM's principal secretary.

Like Karpoori Thakur, Das also believed in the 'peshi' system of file disposal. This meant that I would present the files to him, explain the contents, advise him on what to do and he would generally act on my advice. In one case, however, he seemed to hold a different view. It concerned the same corrupt and highly-controversial excise superintendent, belonging to a politically-powerful caste, the proposal for whose transfer to Patna had earlier resulted in the resignation of the excise minister Baidyanath Mehta.

A proposal was presented by the excise department, once again, for his transfer back to Patna. Ministers belonging to his caste put fresh pressure on Ram Sundar Das to approve the proposal, but I was completely against it. So, whenever I presented the file to the CM, advising him to reject the proposal, he would keep quiet and no decision would be taken. The file remained 'pending'. One day, during my absence, when he was on a train journey with another officer from the CM secretariat, he called for the file and promptly approved the proposal that was quickly implemented. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do after that.

A few months after he had demitted office, Karpoori Thakur asked to see me to discuss a personal matter, and I offered to go to his house to meet him. My detractors immediately carried the news to the CM, complaining that I was still hobnobbing with his political rival. A day or two later, I visited Ram Sundar Das at his residence for some work. He called me into his bedroom, where he was still tying his dhoti, and asked me casually, 'Yashwant babu, did you meet Karpooriji at his house?'

I looked him straight in the eye and replied calmly, 'Yes sir. He wanted to discuss a personal matter and I offered to visit him. I will show you the same courtesy when you are no longer the CM.' My firm and frank words settled the matter. Over the years, I kept my word to him and not only visited him at his house whenever required but also helped him in several ways whenever he needed it.

Das was also an absolute gentleman. I soon started enjoying his complete confidence and had no difficulty in working with him. My closeness to him continued till he passed away in 2015.

JP's death

A major tragedy struck us when Jayaprakash Narayan passed away in October 1979. Both his kidneys had failed when he was jailed by Indira Gandhi and incarcerated in Chandigarh. He had been on dialysis for a long time.

Before this, in March of the same year, when he had fallen seriously ill and been admitted to Bombay's Jaslok hospital for treatment, I remember making a special trip with Karpoori to see him to make sure that he received the best possible medical help. It was then that a rumour had spread that JP was no more –

even leading to an announcement by PM Morarji Desai in the Parliament, that in turn, led to the mistaken passing of a condolence resolution. The unfortunate and embarrassing error was discovered soon enough and rectified.

This time, therefore, our first concern was not to repeat that mistake. The news of his death was broken only when the doctors had finally confirmed the sad truth. Immediately thereafter, people began assembling at JP's residence in Patna's Kadamkuan. The Mahila Charkha Samiti, where he stayed, was in a very crowded area and we soon realised that we would not be able to manage the crowds there. It was decided to bring the body and place it in the Shri Krishna Memorial Hall near the Gandhi Maidan where people could have his last *darshan*.

The leaders of the Janata Party and others began to arrive in Patna. Among them was Chandra Shekhar, president of the party and one of JP's closest followers. By the time he reached the hall, the crowds had already swelled to unmanageable proportions. Chandra Shekhar, therefore, decided to place the body in an open truck and drive it around Gandhi Maidan for the benefit of the crowds who wanted to pay their last respects. The body was then taken to Bans Ghat in Patna where JP's last rites were performed.

A revolutionary was dead. An epoch had come to an end. My icon in public life was no longer available to guide me when needed. His death was a deep personal loss for me. I have always regretted the fact that I did not leave my job and join him while he was still alive. Years later when I finally did it, it was more to keep my promise to him than anything else.

With Mrs. Gandhi's return to power at the Centre in 1980, the Janata Party governments in various states across the country were dismissed and President's rule was imposed, including in Bihar. The governor AR Kidwai summoned me to Raj Bhawan and suggested that I assist him, just as I had assisted the two CMs, in the discharge of his new responsibilities. It was a strange suggestion and I reminded him that he already had a principal secretary, several years my senior in service, no less, who could easily assist him. Kidwai, however, insisted on the new arrangement and I had no choice but to agree.

A special situation was thus created where I continued to occupy the post of principal secretary to the chief minister, without there being a CM. The old arrangement of the files being submitted to the CM's secretariat by the various departments of the government continued and, like before, we processed them for

eventual clearance by the governor.

CHAPTER 12

MINISTRY OF SHIPPING AND TRANSPORT

In the meantime, AP Sharma had become a cabinet minister in Delhi, in-charge of shipping and transport. He was later given charge of the civil aviation ministry as well. Soon after he became a minister, he asked me to join him again as his special assistant. I had already been promoted to the rank of joint secretary in GoI and was, thus, too senior to serve as part of a minister's personal staff but AP Sharma would not give up easily. He made a plea to prime minister Indira Gandhi to permit this as a special arrangement.

When the file reached her, she wrote on it in her own hand, that since I was too senior to become a special assistant, I should be brought to the ministry as a joint secretary. Once in the ministry, it would be entirely within the minister's discretion to assign me relevant work. So, a new post of joint secretary was created in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport, and I was posted against it.

My transfer to Delhi was not without problems and that, too, from unexpected quarters. After the imposition of President's rule in Bihar, PP Nayyar (IAS) had been elevated to the post of chief secretary. He called me to his office one day and demanded that the file relating to the probe into the death of LN Mishra be handed over to him. LN Mishra's death, in a bomb blast at Samastipur railway station in January 1975, had been shrouded in mystery and there was a general feeling that it had not been properly investigated.

Karpoori had taken a lot of interest in the case and had specially asked one of Bihar's senior-most IPS officers, SB Sahay, to investigate it afresh. Some coordination with the CBI had also been established. Sahay had submitted a very startling report but before action could be taken on it Karpoori ceased to be CM. Ram Sundar Das did not take much interest in the matter and Sahay's report had remained locked in my almirah.

So, when asked for it, I made a copy of the file to be kept in the CM secretariat

and gave the original to Nayyar. I later learnt that Nayyar had sent a report to the Centre, alleging that I was involved in a conspiracy, along with Karpoori and Sahay, to somehow implicate Mrs. Gandhi in the minister's murder. Obviously, the Government of India knew better, and the report did not come in the way of my transfer. Till date, I have not been able to figure out Nayyar's motive and his extensive efforts in trying to damage my reputation and career. Some colleagues told me that he was like that only.

Success creates its own enemies, as I was to learn later in life as well.

I joined the Ministry of Shipping and Transport as joint secretary in May 1980 and was given charge of transport. I was made a director on the board of the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC), which was an undertaking of the Government of India in those days. We were given government accommodation at Satya Marg in Chanakyapuri, and the children moved back home from their grandparents' house in Vasant Vihar. Our family was together once again.

AP Sharma soon appointed another officer as his special assistant and I was not required to look after day-to-day work in his office. It did create an unusual situation in the ministry, however, as he insisted on taking my advice on various matters, making everyone aware of my proximity to him. I must say, I did not enjoy the situation at all. In 1982, AP Sharma was shifted to the Ministry of Communications and was replaced by its previous incumbent, CM Stephen, as minister of shipping and transport. Life returned to normal for me in the ministry.

However, Sharma had other plans for me. He now wanted me to join his new ministry as secretary of the Posts and Telegraph (P&T) Board, the only post that was then available for an IAS officer. I was comfortable in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport and not at all keen to shift to the Ministry of Communications, but Sharma was insistent.

I remember how CM Stephen walked into my room one day, much to my surprise as it was unusual for a minister to do so, to tell me how AP Sharma was putting a lot of pressure on him for my transfer. He added that, given his experience in the Ministry of Communications, it would not be a good move from the point of view of my career. I told him I was enjoying my work in the shipping and transport ministry and had no wish to move. Thus, the matter was finally allowed to rest there.

AP Sharma later went on to become the governor of Punjab in 1983, as well as of West Bengal. Once again, he wanted me to join him as his secretary and again I had a tough time convincing him to take an officer from the Punjab cadre instead. My association with him continued for as long as he lived. He was a fine person and very affectionate in his dealings with me, who always kept my welfare in mind.

During my four-year stay in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport, I worked under several ministers and held various charges in the ministry as a joint secretary. From transport, I was shifted to ports and, finally, to the shipping division, which was considered the most important charge in the ministry. This is evident from the fact that the Ministry of Shipping is now a standalone ministry, as is the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways.

Stephen was replaced by Vijay Bhasker Reddy, a former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh who, in turn, was replaced by Veerendra Patil, a former chief minister of Karnataka. Patil had contested against Indira Gandhi in Chikmagalur in the 1978 by-elections on a Janata Party ticket but had later returned to the Congress party.

Similarly, the ministers of state also kept changing. When I joined the ministry, it was Sitaram Kesri, then Buta Singh and, finally, Ziaur Rahman Ansari. This gave me an opportunity to work with various kinds of politicians, although they all belonged to the same party—the Congress. Since I held charge of all the important divisions of the ministry at some point or the other, I also served as a director on the boards of all the public sector undertakings (PSUs) that fell under it.

During my time in the ministry, I was a trustee of the Calcutta Port Trust, and served, first as Director and later as the Chairman-cum-Managing Director (CMD) of DTC. The other boards I served on included the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI), the Cochin Shipyard, the Hindustan Shipyard at Vizag and the Central Inland Water Transport Corporation (CIWTC) in Calcutta. The exposure that these posts provided was very useful, as it gave me a first-hand experience of the working of central PSUs.

Dealing with the DTC

The DTC, which ran Delhi's public bus system, was notorious for its inefficiencies, losses and the rude behaviour of its drivers and conductors. However, it had to perform an extremely important task during the Asian Games that were to be held in Delhi in 1982.

The chairman of DTC was an IAS officer, US Srivastav. He was a favourite of Sanjay Gandhi's and had been suspended during the Janata Party rule. In fact,

warrants were issued against both Sanjay Gandhi and him in the Maruti case in 1977, forcing him to seek anticipatory bail. He was reinstated and brought back with full honours to head the DTC again when Mrs. Gandhi came back to power in 1980. Obviously, he had rendered faithful service to the Congress party and to Sanjay Gandhi, especially, during the Emergency.

Sitaram Kesri,whom I had known in my Germany days, when he had visited and connected with me as a fellow Bihari, remained very fond of me throughout his life, especially, when he was the MoS for shipping and transport. One day, he called me over and said, 'The Asian Games are to be held soon. The public transport system in Delhi will have to play a very important role during the Games, hence I would like you to take additional charge of DTC as its chairman.'

'But, Sir, Srivastav is already there. He is also a hot favourite of the PMO,' I gently reminded him.

'You leave that to me. I know how to manage the PMO,' he replied. Glancing at me quizzically, he added, 'Challenge *sweekar karne se ghabrate ho kya*?' (Are you scared of accepting a challenge?)

'Not at all,' I replied, 'I have never run away from challenges!'

I don't know how Kesri managed to convince Mrs. Gandhi but, soon enough, Srivastav was transferred and I was given additional charge of DTC. I worked hard to whip the organisation into shape. I would often leave home at the crack of dawn to make surprise visits to various bus depots when they were out-shedding the buses. During these visits, I would personally see to it that the buses were cleaned, route numbers illuminated and clearly visible, and the necessary staff duly in place.

I would also make surprise visits to bus-stops to check whether the buses were halting at the right stops, whether the conductors were guiding the exit and entry of passengers properly and whether the passengers themselves were behaving appropriately. In addition to these checks, I would also travel incognito in buses to check the general behaviour of the staff.

Both my wife, who was now teaching at Bluebells School in Delhi's Jor Bagh, and my children used public buses regularly and often related their experiences to me, which also helped. The surprise visits had their desired impact and I noticed a marked improvement in the behaviour of the staff. I also decided that the fleet strength should be enhanced and submitted a proposal through the ministry to the Planning Commission, then headed by Dr. Manmohan Singh. Singh approved the proposal to buy 1,700 new buses, and I ensured that these were ready in time for the Asian Games.

Rajiv Gandhi took a great deal of interest in the Asian Games and often called meetings with all the relevant office bearers to review the preparations. Arun Nehru and Arun Singh were his two close aides. At first, they dismissed my claims that

the DTC would perform its task efficiently but, after our discussions, they began to take me more seriously. The most important challenge for us was to bring nearly 70,000 people to the Jawahar Lal Nehru Stadium for the inaugural ceremony and, more importantly, to carry them all back home after it. The latter was likely to prove more difficult as the passengers were likely to pour out of the stadium after the end of the opening ceremony and rush to board the buses.

I worked out a comprehensive plan, down to the smallest detail, taking all my officers and employees into confidence, while explaining each step to ensure no mistakes were made. We rehearsed the drill repeatedly, until all the employees involved clearly understood their tasks. We provided for two conductors in each bus. The secretary of the ministry, Mohinder Singh, who did not like me much, was going to London for a meeting. Before leaving, he told me, 'Yashwant, I will be dismissed from service on my return from London, but you are sure to be dismissed on the spot at the JLN stadium on the day of the inauguration!'

'We will see', I replied confidently.

On the inaugural day, the buses brought in the people as per our plan. I was personally present in the parking lot, staying there till the end as I had no desire to go into the stadium to watch the grand ceremony. When it was over, the crowds poured out of the stadium, as expected, but we were ready and waiting for them. I ensured that queues were formed at each boarding bay. As one bus filled up and left, another followed immediately. Thus, without any loss of time, we managed to send the very last passenger home in a most orderly manner. What's more, I still had many buses left in reserve.

The staff of these buses and my other colleagues could not hide their joy when we finished the task successfully. They shouted slogans like '*Yashwant Sinha zindabad!*' and carried me around on their shoulders. It was an exhilarating moment for us all.

My DTC tenure did not end with the Asian Games, as predicted by the secretary of the ministry. I was made to continue, owing to the sheer inertia in the ministry. At the same time, Lalit Maken, an influential Congress trade union leader, decided to establish his hold on the DTC and other Delhi PSUs. Not only did he hold meetings and enlist workers for his union, but he also acted roughly and started assaulting officers who resisted his unreasonable demands. My officers complained to me but my plea to the law and order authorities fell on deaf ears. Some well-wishers even suggested that I buy peace by accepting Maken's demands but I was determined not to give in to such blackmail. The confrontation became so serious that Maken decided to teach me a lesson by calling for a one-day strike in the month of March.

I went to my two ministers, Reddy and Ansari, and urged them to discipline

Maken, arguing that it was their own party colleague who was creating trouble. They, in turn, pleaded helplessness because of Maken's proximity to Rajiv Gandhi. A day before the planned strike, I was summoned by prime minister Indira Gandhi at her 1, Safdarjung Road residence. My minister, Reddy, MoS Ansari and secretary Mohinder Singh were also there. After a brief meeting with the PM, we were advised to discuss the matter further with Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv did not have any official position but that was how the government worked in those days.

Rajiv Gandhi asked me, 'What is going to happen tomorrow?'

'I will break the strike,' I replied.

He asked me how I planned to do this, and here I made a strategic error by explaining my game plan to him in detail. He wished me luck and the meeting ended. When I walked out, I noticed Lalit Maken sitting in a corner in the next room.

You can guess the rest.

I left home after an early dinner, telling my wife, 'It is going to be a long night but don't worry, things will be alright.' Going from depot to depot, I inspected the arrangements we had made to out-shed the buses, after which I proceeded to the Pragati Maidan control room, firmly stationing myself there. When the time came to out-shed the buses, I was horrified to find that, at each depot, Maken had a counter-strategy ready to checkmate mine.

I immediately realised that Maken had prior knowledge of my plans in detail, enabling him to pre-empt every move. The few buses that managed to ply were disabled by the striking DTC employees and ultimately not a single bus could run that day. Unfortunately, a DTC worker was also killed in police firing at the Vasant Vihar depot. I received a hostile reception from the workers when I went to some of the depots.

Parliament was in session and, naturally, there was quite an uproar. So, while I had to tackle the strike, on the one hand, on the other hand, I had to keep running to Parliament to brief the ministers, on the fast developing situation. Many MPs blamed me personally. The memory of that day still disturbs me and contributed, in no small measure, to my decision to finally quit the IAS.

Unfortunately, my woes with the DTC did not end there. The ministers felt, and rightly so, that if I was transferred immediately after the strike, it would be construed as a concession to the striking staff. So, they asked me to stay on. Nothing happened for a few months, which left me feeling completely fed up and frustrated.

I sought a meeting with PC Alexander who was principal secretary to the PM

and requested him to help relieve me of the additional charge. Alexander told me that I had done good work in the DTC and should consider getting posted there on a regular basis, instead of staying in the ministry. I argued that urban transport was not my forte and that I had no wish to specialise in that area. When nothing happened for weeks after the meeting, I went to the secretary of my ministry, PG Gavai, and told him bluntly, 'If I am not relieved of the additional charge of DTC, I will resign from the IAS itself.'

He advised me to be patient. I told him that I had been patient for months, but nothing had happened, adding, 'You have another JS in the ministry who is in-charge of transport and is two years my senior in service. Yet, he was not given the additional charge of DTC and here, despite looking after the heavy charge of shipping, I have been carrying this extra burden all these months. I looked after the DTC during the Asian Games, as a special case. I should not be punished for my sincerity.' I finally got my way and was relieved of the DTC charge at last. It was given as an additional charge to the JS transport, Govindji Mishra, an IAS officer of the Rajasthan cadre.

My moment of poetic justice came years later in 1988 when, after I had joined politics, the same DTC employees who had demonstrated against me so violently during that one-day strike, came to me with the request to take Lalit Maken's place as the head of their trade union. They wanted me to secure justice for them against oppression by the then Congress government. Lalit Maken had been killed by Punjab terrorists in July 1985 and his trade union in the DTC was without a real leader. I accepted their offer and thus began a life-long association with the DTC. As their trade union leader, I did whatever I could to help the workers. I am not active now but my personal relationship with many of the older DTC employees continues to this day.

I had some other memorable experiences in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport, as well. Veerendra Patil was a very competent minister. He was very thorough and would make diligent preparations to answer questions in Parliament. Anyone who is familiar with the exercise knows that ministry officials prepare comprehensive notes on the questioned subject, running into several pages, to enable the minister to answer supplementary questions after the main reply.

Patil would study the notes thoroughly and come prepared with his queries neatly written on the margins of the 'note for pad' as these notes are called. He asked for clarifications on these points during briefings held before we all left for Parliament. It helped him field supplementary questions in Parliament very competently and knowledgeably. I followed this excellent practice when I became a minister myself a few years later.

AP Sharma, on the other hand, was not as meticulous and often fumbled while

answering supplementary questions in Parliament. His question day, unfortunately, coincided with the PM's. Since he did not want to cut a sorry figure, in front of Indira Gandhi no less, he got it changed to another day in the week.

Another interesting experience involving Veerendra Patil comes to mind here. He called me to his office one day, where I found Sanjay Khan, the film actor, sitting with him. Patil pushed a piece of paper toward me and asked, 'How did you pass such an order?' The paper was supposedly a government order signed by me, allotting a piece of precious land belonging to the Bombay Port Trust to someone for construction of a five-star hotel. Since Sanjay Khan was also interested in the property, he had obviously complained to the minister, whom he knew well, alleging serious impropriety on my part in the transaction.

I had never passed such an order and one look at the paper confirmed my suspicion that the document had been forged. I told the minister as much and insisted on a criminal case being filed immediately for enquiry by the CBI. The minister agreed, and a case was registered. Many years later a CBI official came to record my statement. I do not know what finally became of the matter.

I had some other interesting experiences in the ministry, especially involving some of India's neighbours, which stood me in good stead in my later stints in government. Some of these are worth a mention.

Within the Ministry of Shipping and Transport, I was also in charge of inland water transport. We had a PSU called the Central Inland Water Transport Corporation, which was largely responsible for running steamer services from the Calcutta port to some destinations in Assam, via Bangladesh. We had a bilateral treaty with Bangladesh to permit the navigation and I had to go to Bangladesh twice to negotiate the extension of this agreement during my tenure.

During my first visit I found that my Bangladeshi counterpart was being unnecessarily difficult and the negotiations were not going anywhere. So, after a couple of days, I decided to wind up the visit since we had failed to reach an agreement. Muchkund Dubey was the High Commissioner in Dhaka at that time and I had kept him duly posted about the developments.

My delegation and I had already reached the airport to catch our flight back to Delhi when I got a call from Dubey. He informed me that he had spoken to the Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator (Bangladesh was under military rule at the time), who had promised to intervene. He requested us to come back for

another round of talks. I accepted his advice and returned to the city. Our point of view prevailed, and we managed to salvage the talks and successfully finalise the extension of the treaty. The other joint secretary of the Bangladesh government that I dealt with was a more reasonable person and I had no difficulty while negotiating with him.

A similar outing to Pakistan was, unfortunately, not so successful. PV Narasimha Rao was the minister for external affairs then, and Natwar Singh was secretary in the MEA dealing with Pakistan. Indira Gandhi and the then president of Pakistan Zia-ul-Haq had decided to set up a Joint Commission in 1982 to promote cooperation between the two countries on a variety of issues. Subsequently, a large Indian delegation visited Islamabad for the first meeting of the Joint Commission.

Since a bilateral shipping agreement with Pakistan was also proposed, I was made a member of the delegation. I held many meetings with various officials and experts in India to determine our negotiating position. The suggestion I received from the officials was that since Pakistan had only one major port, Karachi, we should also offer to open only one major port in India for Pakistani ships to discharge and pick up cargo. But I was not satisfied with this line of argument.

India had ten major ports at the time. Our shipping tonnage was also around six million in gross register tonnage (GRT), whereas Pakistan's was, perhaps, six lakh tonnes. I told my officials that we had nothing to fear, as we were much stronger, and Pakistan would not be able to take away our cargo. I was also in favour of allowing Pakistani ships carrying cargo for land-locked Nepal and off-loading it at the port of Calcutta. In return, we would ask for a similar concession for Afghanistan. I cleared the brief with Natwar Singh, assuring him that I would approach the negotiations with Pakistan in a liberal and constructive spirit. He agreed with my line of thinking.

The trip to Pakistan was very interesting, to say the least. We first landed in Lahore where we were taken to a government rest house for a brief stay. Along the stairs of the rest house that led up to the first floor, and adorning the wall, were paintings of Mughal emperors from Babur to Aurangzeb. I was amused to notice that the last painting in the series was of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Obviously, Jinnah was in the same category as the Mughal kings for the Pakistanis!

I had read somewhere that there were many ancient Hindu temples on the banks of the river Ravi in Lahore, so I decided to use my free time to visit one of them. It was a beautiful temple, though a little out of repair. I saw a group of boys playing in its precincts. They showed little regard for the place of worship, even urinating wherever they wanted. As I toured the complex, I saw a man come running to us. He introduced himself as the temple priest. I pointed to the nuisance being created

by the boys. He pleaded helplessness and said he was doing whatever he could to keep the puja going at the temple, albeit with very little support. It was a disturbing experience.

Natwar Singh had warned us to be very careful in Pakistan. He had told us that our rooms would be bugged and, therefore, all confidential talk must be conducted outside the room and preferably in the garden. We were advised to avoid the great temptation of mentioning our observations regarding the similarities between Indians and Pakistanis, because nothing upset a Pakistani more than being told that we were alike. Back then, and in my subsequent dealings with the Pakistanis, that observation held true. It is something that strikes at the heart of their very identity as a separate nation.

I got along very well with my Pakistani counterpart and we negotiated a draft treaty. He even took me to Murree, a beautiful hill station on the Pir Panjal range, where we spent a couple of hours in the scenic government rest house. The draft of the bilateral shipping agreement had been prepared by the Pakistanis, based on the points agreed upon by both sides. I looked at the draft in Murree, hardly suspecting any foul play. Suddenly, I came across a formulation that attracted my attention. In simple English, it meant that India would not be allowed to carry Afghanistan-bound cargo and discharge it at the Karachi port while Pakistan would enjoy that facility at the Calcutta port as far as Nepal was concerned.

I was quite puzzled, as this was contrary to the understanding we had reached. I asked my Pakistani counterpart what this peculiar formulation meant. He said it was inconsequential and that I should not worry about it. When I explained the implications of the language used in the draft to him, he kept quiet, but I was very upset. I told him that I had negotiated with him in good faith and in a liberal spirit all along and if Pakistan had a point of view, it should have been explained to me frankly and not slipped surreptitiously into the draft. He said that he had done the best he could, and the rest was up to me. I was extremely disappointed and told him frankly, 'We are here to negotiate a bilateral shipping agreement. We are not here to cheat each other.' As expected after this fiasco, the agreement fell through.

Later I made another trip to Pakistan for the same purpose, once again without any success. However, this time I was able to convince the Pakistanis to allow me to visit Peshawar. When asked why I was keen to do so, I wove a yarn about how I had spent some of my childhood years there and wanted to see the old place. They easily fell for my made up explanation and agreed to the trip. The Soviets had already occupied Afghanistan and a considerable number of Afghan refugees had taken shelter in Pakistan. I could see their camps all along the route to Peshawar.

Peshawar itself turned out to be very interesting, with its tribal population and their special headgear. I even bought one for myself. The city also had a large

Buddhist museum, with beautiful pieces of Buddhist sculpture. On the way, I stopped to see the remains of the famous University of Takshashila. The guide showed me around and took me to a long wall where he specially pointed out how there wasn't a single brick out of alignment along its entire length. I looked closely and, much to my surprise, found that he was right.

The guide also told me that, in ancient times, the university used to be famous for Buddhist studies.

'Who was Buddha?' I asked him, feigning ignorance.

'A prince born somewhere in Bharat, but "Paigambar *Saheb ki roshni uske undar ghus gai aur wo ek bada sadhu ban gaya*"' (The Prophet's light entered him, and he became a respected saint), he replied. I had no wish to enlighten him if Lord Buddha had not already done so!

Dealing with Pakistan later, as the external affairs minister, I realised how even ancient history had been rewritten in that country and how school textbooks were spreading poison against India.

My experiences with Pakistan and Bangladesh well demonstrate how difficult it is to deal with India's neighbours. So, I was not surprised when, years later, after I became the external affairs minister and approached prime minister Vajpayee for guidance he told me to give the highest priority to our neighbourhood.

I was extremely keen to promote inland water transport in the rest of our country too and was responsible for drafting the first national waterways legislation in India, in collaboration with the then law secretary Peri Shastri, who was extremely competent in drafting. Apart from setting up an Authority for the development of inland waterways, it also gave the government the power to take over the responsibility of developing them. We started inland shipping services up to Patna from Kolkata as well. Subsequently, the stretch between Kolkata and Allahabad was declared a national waterway, with Patna as an important river port in the middle. There was a lock at Farakka Dam, where the vessel had to be manoeuvred to navigate the river to continue its journey. I undertook a motorboat journey from the Farakka Dam to Kolkata to examine the draft in the river at various places, as well as other navigational requirements. It was an interesting journey, spread over three days.

The secretary with whom I worked the longest in the ministry was Mohinder Singh, a Rajasthan-cadre IAS officer. As I have mentioned earlier, he was not

particularly friendly and would often chastise me unnecessarily. One day, some retired ICS officers dropped in to see him in his office. He sent for me because I was dealing with the subject under discussion, and when I arrived I was duly introduced to the visitors. One of them casually asked me which cadre I belonged to. Before I could answer, Singh answered for me, saying, 'He belongs to the Bihar cadre but don't hold that against him!' Being a proud Bihari, I did not like the remark at all and was quick to tell the seniors that I not only belonged to the Bihar cadre but was also a proud Bihari.

Another incident comes to mind. I had gone to Bombay to attend a meeting. Later the same day, a storm hit the city and many flights were cancelled. I decided to stay on in Bombay and informed those concerned, including the private secretary to Mohinder Singh, about the inadvertent change in my plans. Soon thereafter, I got an angry call from Singh insisting I return the same day. I drove to the airport, where I had to wait for several hours before the first flight to Delhi could leave, failing to understand the reason behind the urgent summons from him. In fact, some of his actions remain a mystery to me till this day.

The story of my tenure in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport would be incomplete without a mention of Admiral Rustom KS Ghandhi, who, after retiring from the Navy, had been appointed as Chairman and MD of the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI). He was a blue-blooded Englishman, if ever there was one in India, not only because of his clipped English accent, but also his mannerisms.

He was known to be close to Mrs. Gandhi and, therefore, wielded a clout far beyond his position in the government. He would, for instance, interrupt a meeting, even with a minister, to say, 'Minister, it is already 1 o'clock and time for my lunch.' He would not even wait for his senior's response before walking out of the room. Nobody took any 'pangas' with him. Admiral Ghandhi later became a good friend. He must have realised that in taking sensitive decisions sensibly, we were protecting him too. Many years later, when I became finance minister, I took the decision to grant income tax exemption to decorated soldiers at Admiral Ghandhi's suggestion, for which he called and thanked me.

Shipping was a sensitive charge. It involved disbursement of loans to private shipping companies for the purchase of ships from a special fund called the Shipping Development Fund, as well as purchase of ships for the SCI. SS Shukla, an officer belonging to the Indian Defence Accounts Service, was joint secretary and financial advisor in the ministry. He was well-versed in the ways of the government, and once gave me an invaluable piece of advice to navigate tricky official waters.

Shukla said, 'Yashwant, *kagaz ka pait zuroor bhar kar rakhna*.' (You must

always keep the official paper trail well fed). Having been investigated by the CBI once, his theory was simple. The written word was the only thing that would survive in government, years after the officers had moved on. Oral pleas would not be of any use. If you were fully protected by the written word, even the CBI could do you no harm. I was an important member of the Shipping Development Fund Committee, as well as the Ship Acquisition Committee of the SCI. In positions like these, you not only had to be honest, but also had to be perceived as being honest. So, Shukla and I always made sure that all the papers necessary for arriving at a decision were made available and the arguments in favour of a decision fully recorded.

It was a very useful practice, which not only helped me in the ministry but also later when I held the more important post of a minister in the Government of India. Yet, I have also learned that it is difficult to prevent gossip, even if you do everything right.

CHAPTER 13

RESTLESSNESS

During my tenure in Delhi, I was constantly plagued by a nagging feeling that I had failed to keep my promise to JP. I was also becoming increasingly disillusioned with the IAS. A host of factors contributed to this. My father had once told me that I should never consider quitting the service, as long as he was alive. I interpreted it to mean that once he had departed from this world, I could do what I wanted. I had abided by his wish and now that he was no more, I could weigh my options afresh. My family situation was also qualitatively different than before.

Sharmila was happily settled with her husband Ashok Kantha in Beijing, China, where he was posted. She had always wanted to travel and visit other lands. So, when her marriage to Ashok, an IFS officer from Bihar, was proposed, just as she was about to graduate in Economics from Lady Shriram College, she had readily agreed. The wedding was held in Patna where we had rented a house for the event. Jayant, after finishing his schooling from St. Columba's was already in IIT-Delhi. Sumant had just finished his schooling from the same school and had got admission to IIT-Delhi as well. He had also won a National Talent scholarship of ₹200 per month. This, incidentally, had been my starting salary in the IAS.

By then, I had also built a house in Patna, which was now on rent. I was also entitled to a pension after having put in over twenty years of service in the IAS. Thus, I was in a comfortable enough position to look after my family and keep the proverbial wolf from the door, as once mandated by JP.

One morning, after reaching office and purely on an impulse, I called my PA and dictated a brief letter addressed to the secretary of the ministry, Prakash Narain (who had succeeded Mohinder Singh). As I dictated the letter, my PA kept looking at me with alarm, surprise and disbelief. 'Don't worry. Just type it. Then bring it back for my signature,' I told him calmly.

My hand did not shake as I signed the letter and despatched it to the Secretary.

In it, I had asked for voluntary retirement from the IAS, with effect from 1 April

1984.

No one had any inkling of my action that day, not even my wife. The decision to finally leave the IAS had been a long time coming, sixteen years in all. Yet, when it did happen, it was all very sudden. It was also entirely my call, with no 'partners in crime' to speak of. I did not want any, as I wanted to shoulder all the responsibility or blame myself. I did not want to accuse anyone later, or say anything like, 'Look, I had consulted you; you did not stop me!'

Since then, many people have come to me for advice on quitting their jobs to join politics. My advice has always been simple and straightforward: 'Go to the nearest hilltop all by yourself and spend as much time there as you want, thinking about it. Then take whatever decision you want to. Take it on your own, and by yourself, so that later you cannot blame me or anyone else for it.'

On that fateful day too, I had also denied myself the luxury of ever blaming anyone else for my crucial decision.

All hell broke loose when news of my resignation spread. My colleagues, seniors and ministers were all shocked at what I had done. I spent my entire day, in office as usual and returned home in the evening. I told my wife, as cheerfully as I could, 'I resigned from the IAS today!'

Nilima was far from amused. She lost her temper, totally shocked at this unexpected step. 'What! How could you? And without even asking me!' she shouted angrily, 'Alright, do what you like! You don't care for anyone except yourself! Not even for the children, or for me! Do you even know what happened to Sumant today?'

'What happened? Where is he?' I asked, all thoughts of the day's events fleeing my mind.

She then informed me that Sumant had gone to the Delhi Gymkhana Club to play tennis, where he had met with a bizarre accident. As he was lining up a shot, the racquet slipped from his hand, hit the ground and broke into two. The metal part of the racquet then bounced back up and struck him hard on his face, narrowly missing his eye. The metal had cut into the flesh of his chin, he had bled profusely and had been rushed to the hospital where the wound had to be stitched up.

At the time, my friend Murli Sinha was visiting from the US and staying with us. To comfort the injured boy, he had taken him to the market for an ice-cream treat. As for me, I was shocked into silence, especially on seeing my son's blood-stained clothes lying in a corner. Soon enough, Sumant returned with Murli, a big bandage covering his young face. He had taken the accident in his stride and looked quite calm and composed. The same could not be said of his parents!

My new venture had got off to a very inauspicious start, indeed.

My wife, who suspected that Murli had instigated me to resign also gave him a

piece of her mind. She was wrong, though. My resignation came as much of a surprise to Murli as it did to her. Murli, no doubt, supported the idea because whenever I had discussed it with him he had told me to go ahead and follow my heart. The same was true of my other close friends, Shyamnarain, Anwar, Keshav and Bhagwan. Perhaps they believed in me more than my wife did. Or maybe they didn't have as much invested in my life-altering decision as my immediate family did.

My mother was quite distressed as well and did not like my decision at all. She had come to stay with us in Delhi after the death of my ailing eldest brother the year before. She had had a challenging time caring for him right into her ripe old age, nursing him and pulling him along on his chair, which was not even a wheelchair, from one place to another. By then, she was rather weak and vulnerable herself. Soon enough, my brothers and sisters got the news too. All of them were as shocked as my mother and wife, but I was determined to see it through this time. No amount of opposition was going to persuade me to change my mind.

The secretary of the ministry, Prakash Narain, called me for a personal discussion and agreed to send my letter to the Department of Personnel only after he was convinced that I had not acted on impulse. However, he suggested that I postpone my decision by a few months, provided the 31st March date was not a sacrosanct one for me. Much work was pending on the shipping side. An important international conference on shipping was due to be held in Geneva under the auspices of UNCTAD. I conceded to his wishes as the date was not sacrosanct and could be postponed.

KK Srivastava, the chief secretary of Bihar who was also distantly related to me, came to visit us in Delhi one day. My wife complained bitterly to him about my decision to quit the service. Srivastava agreed that it was a foolish idea. 'What do you plan to do after you have resigned?' he asked me.

'Go to the villages and work for the people,' I replied confidently.

'Good. In that case, I will appoint you secretary, rural development, if you return to Bihar', he offered.

I told him that a secretariat job would again involve pushing files, which was not acceptable to me any longer. 'I won't mind, however, being posted as divisional commissioner in Dumka,' I said. Dumka, in the meanwhile, had been split into six districts and had become a division. Srivastava assured me that it would not be a problem. Following an assurance to reconsider my decision, peace returned to my life and home, and I could concentrate on the work still at hand.

Meanwhile, I was deputed to lead the Indian delegation to the UNCTAD conference on shipping in Geneva, which was to last for over three weeks.

Coincidentally, there I bumped into my old friend Ramaswami Mani who also happened to be in Geneva for the annual meeting of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Mani was now special assistant to the second-highest-ranking official at the UN. Happy and full of life, he was about to be promoted as assistant secretary-general of the UN. I soon learnt that he had a large circle of friends in the UN Secretariat.

I had been elected Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Conference on Shipping, which entitled me to a place on the dais. Often Mani would gingerly walk up the dais, kneel beside my chair and whisper his message into my ear—generally to fix a programme for the evening. We spent many enjoyable evenings together and even travelled to the Matterhorn, a peak in the Alps that straddles the border between Switzerland and Italy.

I told Mani about my plans to quit the IAS, even adding that while he could only be an employee of the UN, I was sure to address its General Assembly one day as the representative of my country! He did not believe me. 'I know how hard you had worked to get into the IAS. How can you ever leave it?' he asked me. When we finally parted company in Geneva, I must admit that the future looked bright for Mani even as it looked bleak and uncertain for me. But that has been the story of my life; I have always given up an assured present for an uncertain future.

From Geneva, I went on a trip to the US—my first to that country. It was a private trip during which I visited my brother Ranjit in Kentucky, my friend Murli in Seneca Falls in upstate New York and another friend Madan Verma in Kansas City. I found the US to be different from Europe in many ways. With a more mixed population, everything was on a much larger scale than it was in Europe. The people were also friendlier and less formal.

On my return to India, I proceeded on leave from the ministry, as agreed. I stayed briefly in Delhi and then went on to Patna. I met KK Srivastava to ask him how soon he would post me to Dumka. JM Lyngdoh, who later made a name for himself as the country's chief election commissioner, was the incumbent commissioner at Dumka in those days. Since nobody was keen to go to Dumka, a transfer there should not have been a problem. Still, Srivastava hesitated. For some reason, he did not sound as confident as he had in Delhi earlier and was unable to give me a definite timeline.

I was extremely disappointed and went straight to the room of my friend and colleague BP Verma, who was finance commissioner, and asked for a sheet of paper on which I reiterated my desire to take voluntary retirement. I was shocked to learn later that, as per rules, since I had postponed my earlier request to quit on March 31, the letter had been treated as withdrawn. Hence, I was forced to give a new notice of three months.

Again, I submitted a fresh notice to the chief secretary of Bihar and requested for it to be expeditiously processed. Srivastava called me again and attempted to reason with me. This time, I was in no mood to listen. I was already on leave from the ministry and, thus, without a job. I wanted to be relieved from service as soon as possible, but the Bihar government continued to abnormally delay the processing of my application due to sheer inertia. One of the formalities I was required to complete was to obtain a 'no dues certificate' from the accountant general of Bihar whose office was in Ranchi.

So, I arranged to pay whatever I owed the government and travelled by road to Ranchi with my friend Keshav Nandan Prasad, who was posted there as an engineer with the state's PWD. I went to the office of the AG personally and managed to get the certificate in a couple of days. Had I not gone there personally, it would probably have taken months. So, I submitted the certificate to the Bihar government and requested them to expedite the matter, once again, before returning to Delhi.

It was around this time that I met Chandra Shekhar for the first time.

Karpoori Thakur had not been keeping well and had been admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. He sent word to me that he wanted to meet me, so I went to see him at the hospital. Chandra Shekhar had also dropped in at the same time. He had just completed his famous *padyatra* (journey on foot) from Kanyakumari to Delhi. When Karpoori introduced us, Chandra Shekhar looked at me with interest. He had heard that I was quitting the IAS and asked, 'What do you plan to do after that?' Before I could reply, a lady who was accompanying him, said, 'Politics join *karenge*, *aur kya*?' I protested and said that I had no such plan. Chandra Shekhar asked me to come meet him sometime.

This chance meeting in AIIMS was my very first with Chandra Shekhar. I later learnt that the lady accompanying him was Sarojini Mahishi, a well-known politician from Karnataka, who had been a minister in Mrs. Gandhi's council of ministers earlier. She was also a famous astrologer and was correct about me, despite my protestations to the contrary, as events were to prove later.

I made no haste to meet Chandra Shekhar. After a couple of weeks, he again sent word through his friend and colleague, Dayanand Sahay, an MP whom I also knew very well, saying he would like to meet me. I told Sahay I would not go to Chandra Shekhar's place, since I did not want to openly hobnob with politicians as

long as I was in service. How silly it sounds from the standards of today! Sahay offered to host us at his house instead. He stayed at 3, Kushak Road, very close to the Janata Party leader's place at South Avenue Lane. The meeting lasted for over an hour. I told him that my plan was to set up a small NGO, live in a hamlet, preferably in Dumka district, and work with the tribal population in the surrounding villages.

'How many villages will you be able to change this way? Five? Ten? Twenty?' he asked skeptically. Chandra Shekhar then went on to explain that in a democracy, the most effective instrument of change was politics. The political process alone could bring about change on a national scale. It was a convincing argument, indeed.

Fate was to intervene yet again, as it repeatedly has throughout my life. Indira Gandhi was assassinated on 31 October 1984—the same day I had gone to see Karpoori Thakur in Bihar Bhawan. Karpoori had planned to quit the Janata Party that day, along with his followers. Knowing my relationship with him, Chandra Shekhar had asked me to intervene and persuade him not to do so. News of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination reached us as I was discussing this matter with Karpoori. We were all in a state of shock, unable to predict what would happen next. I told Karpoori it was yet another reason to postpone his decision, but he was adamant and left Bihar Bhawan without telling me where he was going. Later that day, he announced his decision to quit the Janata Party and join the Lok Dal.

Mrs. Gandhi's assassination led to large scale rioting and violence against the Sikhs in Delhi and other parts of India. Many Sikhs were forced to leave their homes and hearth, and take shelter in refugee camps, even in the capital city of Delhi, where there was large-scale loss of lives and destruction of property. Chandra Shekhar, George Fernandes and a few other friends got together to form a relief committee to help the Sikhs. Chandra Shekhar visited the various refugee camps to empathise with the community. He was the only Indian politician who had condemned the military action at the Akal Takht, under Operation Blue Star. Thus, he was immensely popular among the Sikhs.

I remember when we approached one such camp in Shahdara in east Delhi, we discovered that the angry Sikhs were not allowing any politician to enter their camp. When a few of us got out of our cars and informed them that it was Chandra Shekhar who had come to visit, they immediately agreed to make an exception. Such was his popularity within the Sikh community.

During this time, Jayant was living in the hostel at IIT Delhi. He and his friends had in fact, rushed to the rescue of some Sikhs who were being chased by a mob and had sheltered them from their pursuers. From our house in Satya Marg, we could see smoke and flames rise from burning Sikh homes. It was a very

distressing time across the country, especially in the capital.

Rajiv Gandhi was quickly sworn in as the PM and lost no time in announcing the next general election. My application for voluntary retirement was still pending. I was very unhappy with the conduct of the Bihar government, especially KK Srivastava as I felt he was deliberately delaying a decision. After my conversation with Chandra Shekhar, I had made up my mind to join politics. Working closely with him after the Sikh riots had only steeled my resolve.

So, I wrote a rather strong letter to Srivastava, blaming him personally for the delay. I informed him that I planned to contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, adding that I would hold him personally responsible for denying me the opportunity if he delayed the matter any longer. I had read somewhere that, in a similar situation, a British civil servant had been allowed to quit his job without delay.

My strategy worked. The Bihar government immediately wrote to the Centre, recommending my release from service. I went from office to office in the Department of Personnel in Delhi to secure my release till, finally, the official order was issued.

My association of twenty-four-years with the IAS finally came to an end in November 1984.

Leaving the service had been much more difficult than getting into it, I must say, but I was finally free to begin the next chapter of my life.

During my time as joint secretary, shipping, I had led an Indian delegation to a meeting of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in London. The head of IMO was Chandrika Prasad Srivastava, a very distinguished IAS officer. His career included a stint as JS in the PMO during Lal Bahadur Shastri's term and as CMD, Shipping Corporation of India. He went on to become the first Indian secretary-general of the International Maritime Organization, earlier known as International Maritime Consultative Organization. He held this post for four terms, of four years each.

Srivastava was very impressed by the speech I had delivered on the very first day of the conference. Later, at a reception hosted by him, I met his wife who was popularly known as 'Mataji'. While introducing us, he praised me for my speech. I also took the opportunity to inform them that I was the son-in-law of NC Shrivastava, certain that it would ring a bell. CP Srivastava knew my father-in-law

well and a good rapport was soon established between us.

Mataji asked me to meet her at their residence the following day. As I wondered how to get there, I was informed that the secretary-general's limousine had come to pick me up.

I will never forget that meeting with Mataji. Welcoming me warmly, she announced, 'I will now use this meeting to awaken your "kundalini".'

A little alarmed, I asked her, 'Mataji, what do you mean?'

'You will soon know', she replied with a mysterious smile.

She gave me more details about her spiritual organisation, based on 'sahaja yoga' or 'self-realisation.' She had a huge following, consisting mostly of foreigners. She believed in the awakening of the 'kundalini', the source of basic energy in every human being's body. 'Once you reach the stage of self-realisation, you can achieve just about anything in the world,' she explained.

Apprehensive yet very curious, I followed her instructions. I was made to sit on a mat on the floor. Two youths, a boy and a girl, were standing around and they began to massage my head and shoulders with oil. Mataji enquired whether I felt any better and, naturally, I answered in the affirmative as the massage had soothed my nerves. This went on for quite a while, but the kundalini cannot be awakened in one sitting, it seems. When another session also proved futile, I smiled and said to myself, 'How can they awaken a sinner's kundalini so easily?'

We left it at that and I returned to India, rather unmoved by the whole experiment. Later, I was told that I was truly fortunate as, apparently, some people who had undergone similar treatment had suffered terrible hallucinations later.

Still, this was not the last that I heard of Mataji. I seemed to have made quite an impression on her. CP Srivastava came to India on an official visit later that year, accompanied by Mataji. She had heard about my plans to quit the IAS, so when she arrived in Mumbai she asked me to come to Nasik and meet her. I obeyed. On reaching there, I was struck by the devotion shown by her disciples as I found them all prostrating before her. I was, of course, given a chair to sit next to her. I travelled with her for two days as she visited various places around Nasik. She had an Australian disciple, who was her second-in command and was well respected among her foreign disciples.

I soon discovered what she had in mind for me when she said, 'Yashwant, why don't you join my order as my deputy…second-in-command…you know?' I was rather taken aback by the offer. I told her that I needed to consult my wife before taking any such step. So keen was she to take me into her organisation's fold, that she not only met my wife when she came to Delhi but also my mother, to persuade them both to let me join her.

Mataji claimed that my association with her had been pre-ordained. My

mother's response was, of course, representative of her earthy wisdom. She reasoned, 'This lady's husband continues to work even after retirement from service and she comes to me and tells me that my son should leave service midway to join her?' My wife too, was totally against my becoming a spiritual 'guru'. That settled it, and I declined her offer. Mataji was extremely disappointed to note that I preferred the sinful life of politics to the pious one of spirituality. It seems another, different path had been pre-ordained for me instead.

An important chapter of my life in the IAS finally come to a close, prematurely but by my choice at the end of 1984. I have always looked back at my life in the IAS with satisfaction and pride. My experience of over 24 years in the service taught me many things, which came in handy in the discharge of my responsibilities later. I made many friends and those friendships still endure. Many of my colleagues have departed from this world and I often think of them—of all the good times that we had together, and of the adventures that we shared. I shall always be proud of my association with the service and hope and pray that it will continue to maintain its high standards, especially of integrity, in the years to come.

PART IV

NEW BEGINNINGS; LIFE AFTER THE IAS

CHAPTER 14

TESTING THE WATERS

The general elections were due shortly. I used to visit Chandra Shekhar's home regularly in those days. His house was always crowded with ticket-seekers, gathered there from all parts of the country. Even though I was not privy to all the goings-on within the party, I could feel the poll fever. Soon enough, I was also bitten by the election bug.

Just as the thought of joining politics had not crossed my mind when I had decided to quit the IAS, the thought of contesting elections had not even crossed my mind when I joined politics. But soon my mind started changing and I felt like a soldier who, after a war has been declared, wants to go to the front and fight rather than stay at home. The only person I could think of consulting on the crucial issue of contesting elections was my old friend, Syed Shahabuddin, who had resigned from the IFS and become a prominent leader of the Janata Party by then. He encouraged me to go ahead and take the plunge.

'But from where?' I asked him.

Patna seemed to be the obvious choice. However, Lt. Gen. SK Sinha who had resigned from the Army after being denied the post of the Chief of Army Staff by Indira Gandhi, had already announced his candidature from there. So, Patna was out of the reckoning not only because General Sinha was contesting from there but also because two Kayasthas contesting from the same constituency would have spoiled the chances of both.

Shahabuddin suggested that I contest from Hazaribagh because it had a large Muslim population. If he campaigned for me, their votes would go in my favour. It was also a more peaceful place where election results would not depend upon the number of firearms possessed by a candidate.

I finally mustered enough courage to mention my desire to contest elections to Chandra Shekhar. Taken aback, he asked me, 'Where would you like to contest from?'

'Hazaribagh', was my prompt reply.

Chandra Shekhar received my reply in stony silence, but later agreed to consider my request. This came as a ray of hope for me. The election committee of the Janata Party used to meet daily to finalise the list of candidates from various states, and I waited eagerly for the discussion to turn to Bihar. When the committee finally did meet to consider Bihar, the meeting lasted till late in the evening but was adjourned without a decision on Hazaribagh. Obviously, there was a hitch. I was disappointed but Shahabuddin told me not to lose heart.

During the committee's meeting the following day, and according to the information given to me by Shahabuddin, my candidature was once again met with stiff opposition from the Janata Party leaders from Bihar. Chandra Shekhar finally asserted himself and said, 'I am asking for just one seat in the whole country, that of Hazaribagh. Surely you can grant me this one wish?' That settled the issue in my favour. I was overjoyed.

However, my troubles had only just begun.

Being hard-pressed for money, I wondered how I would meet the campaign expenses, even as I withdrew ₹25,000 from my bank account. Dayanand Sahay, who was aware of my predicament, suggested that I approach Chandra Shekhar for money. He added that someone had just donated ₹50,000 toward the election fund of the party and Chandra Shekhar had left that money with him to be used later. '*Bhai, unki minnat karo, shayad woh apko us* fund *mein se kuchh rakam de dein*.' (Plead with him; he may give you some amount from that fund.)

Armed with his advice, I went to see Chandra Shekhar later that same evening at the Janata Party office near Jantar Mantar, and was fortunate to find him alone. I told him that I was leaving the next morning for Hazaribagh via Patna. Chandra Shekhar advised me to work hard for my victory and assured me that he would come to Hazaribagh to campaign for me. Finding me lingering uncertainly, he must have guessed that something else was bothering me and that perhaps it might be money. Suddenly he looked at me and asked, 'Do you have enough money with you?'

This was the opening I had been waiting for, and I told him that I had withdrawn ₹25,000 from my bank. Still, I hesitated to ask him for any financial assistance, but he was sharp enough to guess my plight. He promptly picked up the phone, dialled a number and told the person at the other end, 'I am sending someone. Please give him all the money that I have left with you.'

Obviously, the person at the other end of the line must have said 'okay', because Chandra Shekhar added with a chuckle, 'But you have not asked me who I am sending' and, enjoying the discomfiture of the moment, added, 'Alright, I am sending Yashwant.'

Then he asked me to go to Sahay and take ₹50,000 from him. I'm sure Chandra

Shekhar must have guessed our little conspiracy, knowing the proximity that Sahay and I enjoyed. But all that did not matter anymore, as I had received a bounty from Chandra Shekhar. Triumphantly, I went and told Sahay, 'You know, I neither had to beg nor plead, as you had suggested, and yet he asked me to collect the entire amount of fifty thousand rupees from you.'

Even Sahay was surprised at Chandra Shekhar's generosity but then that was the hallmark of the latter's personality. He was generous to a fault.

The following day, I took a flight to Patna, and upon arriving there decided to visit the Janata Party office to meet the Bihar leaders. The office was in a residential flat on Bailey Road. The reception I received was shocking, to say the least. Tripurari Sharan Singh was the president of the party and Kapildeo Singh the chairman of the Campaign Committee. They both belonged to the socialist faction of the Janata Party and wanted to field their own candidate from Hazaribagh, Ramanika Gupta, a sitting MLA from the Mandu assembly segment of the Hazaribagh constituency. She was also a prominent labour leader of Bihar, and my candidature seemed to have ruined her chances. This was also the reason for the delay in deciding the candidate from the Hazaribagh seat.

The hostility of these two leaders towards me was palpable. They were offensive and rude and made me feel miserable. Tripurari shouted, 'How many persons do you know in Hazaribagh? Can you name a few? *Chalein aate hain chunav ladne! Arre apni izzat ka khayal nahin to kam se kam,* party *ki izzat ka toh khayal rakhna chaahiye*.' (Here he goes, fighting elections! Even if he has no concern for his own reputation, he should at least give a thought to the dignity of the party.) I remember Kapildeo nodding his head furiously in agreement. I had already collected the mandatory forms A and B from the party's central office in Delhi and my candidature was final, yet they ordered me to go to Hazaribagh and on assess the situation realistically. They added that a final decision in the matter would only be taken after I had done so.

Of course, I was extremely hurt. On the way out, I bumped into Ram Sundar Das – the state's former CM and my ex-boss, who reassured me with the words, 'Yashwant babu, don't worry, Chandra Shekhar himself is behind your candidature.' A little cheered up by his comment, I left for Hazaribagh.

My brother Ajit's son, Ajay, was married to the daughter of a Mr. Katariar, a leading lawyer of the Patna High Court. The Katariar family belonged to Barhi in

Hazaribagh. A branch of the family lived in Barhi while another was in Hazaribagh. I met the family in Barhi on my way and stayed with their relatives in Hazaribagh until I finally managed to get a room in the local inspection bungalow of the PWD. I was soon able to make the acquaintance of some local Janata Party leaders. Chief among them was Prof. RS Ambastha, who was quite an influential person and taught at the local college. Despite being much younger than me, he took me under his wing and introduced me to other party workers.

I tried my best to get in touch with the Bihar leaders in Patna, but the telephone system refused to oblige, and the calls would not go through. Finally, Ambastha and I fixed a date for filing my nomination papers. My IAS batchmate, MC Subarna, was the commissioner of the Hazaribagh division. He invited me for an early lunch on the day, to avoid missing the auspicious moment for filing my papers, as fixed by the local astrologer.

When I reached the deputy commissioner's office after lunch, I was overwhelmed to see a large crowd gathered there. They all carried Janata Party flags and I couldn't help but marvel at Ambastha's organisational skills. However, on drawing nearer, I was in for a huge shock. The crowd was not shouting slogans for me but for Ramanika Gupta, who had also decided to file her nomination on the same day and that too as the Janata Party candidate!

Ambastha advised me to take the 'patli gali' (easy way out) and file my nomination on another day. I had no choice but to accept his advice. The auspicious moment had already passed.

When I filed my papers after a few days, there were no cheering crowds and no one shouting slogans in my support, in stark contrast to the day Ramanika had filed hers. There was only Ambastha and a few others. When the day for the scrutiny of the nomination papers came, the deputy commissioner went through the process of examining each one diligently. At the end of it, he accepted the nomination papers of the other candidates but solemnly announced that, as far as the Janata Party was concerned, two separate candidates had filed their papers, along with the necessary forms A and B. This was not allowed, he said.

I was speechless and more than a little anxious. What would happen now? The representative of the Congress party, Ram Babu, son of former chief minister KB Sahay, told the deputy commissioner bluntly that both the candidates should be declared as Independents and denied the party symbol of the farmer with a plough. At this stage, I meekly suggested that the decision be withheld for a day or two so that I could get the confusion cleared. The DC granted me a day's time to have the matter sorted out.

Completely shattered, I decided to call Chandra Shekhar. Since making long distance calls was not easy in those days, I went to the local telephone exchange to

call him in Delhi. Again, the call would not go through. In sheer desperation, I decided to go all the way back to Patna, from where I could use a phone to apprise Chandra Shekhar of these unpleasant developments.

The events of the past few days had completely demoralised my camp. But there were others who were determined to extract their pound of flesh before I left Hazaribagh. Chief among them was a former government employee who had been convicted in a famous corruption scandal in Bihar related to lotteries a few years ago and had spent many years in jail. I do not know why he had latched on to me, but he started pressurising me to immediately settle his exaggerated bills. He even tried to intimidate me with firearms. Carrying them in both his trouser pockets, he kept menacingly moving his hand over the bulges. I kept my composure and said I would not spend any extra money till the issue of my candidature was resolved. My firm stand settled the issue.

Driving through the night, I reached my brother-in-law Madhukar's place in Patna early the next morning. When he learnt about my predicament, Madhukar immediately handed me his phone to speak to Chandra Shekhar. I was clearly overcome with emotion and spoke excitedly to him, getting a calm and patient hearing in return. When I finished my tale of woe, he told me to speak to Bapu Kaldate, the general secretary of the party, to resolve the issue. He also promised to speak to him.

Bapu put me at ease by saying that he would speak to the Election Commission in Delhi to inform them that I was the official party candidate and that they should settle the issue in my favour. In those days, the central office of a party had the power to make changes even after the scrutiny of the nomination papers. This is not allowed any more.

After this, I went to see Satish (Sam) Bhatnagar, an IAS officer of the 1958 batch, who was the Chief Electoral Officer of Bihar. Since I knew him well, I poured my heart out to him. He sympathised with me but said that a person with my background should never have chosen the Janata Party, adding *'Narak mein bhi thela theli*?' (Is there jostling even in hell?) I told him to expect a communication from the Election Commission soon regarding my candidature. I was supposed to collect it and return to Hazaribagh as quickly as possible. Alas, I was kept waiting in vain. I would visit Bhatnagar's office every day, only to return disappointed because the expected missive had not arrived.

On the third day, I learnt that the letter had indeed arrived on the very first day but the clerk in charge had ignored it because he did not deem it important enough to inform Bhatnagar. Anyway, the problem was soon sorted out and Bhatnagar handed me a letter declaring me as the party's official candidate from Hazaribagh. I was allotted the party symbol of the farmer with a plough. Armed with the letter, I

triumphantly returned to Hazaribagh.

Meanwhile, after having waited for two days, the deputy commissioner-cum-returning officer had declared both Ramanika and me as independent candidates. I was allotted the symbol of a lady with a basket on her head. Even though this was reversed later, and I was duly allotted the Janata Party symbol, the confusion continued to haunt me throughout the campaign. Ramanika had to be content with contesting the election as an independent candidate.

I campaigned hard and travelled extensively to every nook and corner of the constituency, addressing public meetings with influential locals. But I had to suffer some distressing experiences as well.

Nageshwar Prasad was a leading lawyer of Hazaribagh whose support meant a lot to me. He belonged to the Gola block. One day, he and I decided to travel together to Gola to meet some important people there. On the way, we stopped at a chemist's shop in Mandu. Nageshwar babu thought it would be useful for me to meet the owner, who was influential in the area. When he requested him to support me, the shopkeeper flew into a rage and shouted that I had no business contesting from Hazaribagh and spoiling Ramanika's chances. He swore his allegiance to her, saying, '*Hum sirf, aur sirf, Ramanikaji ko* vote *denge*!' Crestfallen after this rude jolt, we proceeded to Gola.

On another day, I was scheduled to address a public meeting in a place called Simaria, in the Chatra district, which was a part of the Hazaribagh constituency at that time. When I arrived there, my workers told me to wait a while until they could collect a crowd at the chowk. They took me to a nearby shop, borrowed a chair and left me there to wait untill they could come and fetch me. The shopkeeper, out of sheer curiosity, began chatting with me.

'*Babuji, aap kis party se uthen hain*?' (Which party are you contesting from?) he enquired.

'Janata Party', I replied promptly.

Frowning hard he asked, '*Wohi na jiske head Chandra Shekhar hain*?'

'Yeah, yeah,' I replied eagerly, thinking that I had found another supporter.

Instead, he became furious and scowled, 'Chandra Shekhar *wohi to hain, jinhone Sikhon ko* support *kiya tha, Operation Blue Star mein. Utho iss kursi se; iss per baithne ki jurrat tumne kaise ki*?' (Chandra Shekhar is the same person who supported the Sikhs during Operation Blue Star. Get up from this chair; how dare you sit on it?)

What could I do? I silently got up from the chair and moved away. Shock at such rudeness apart, I learnt one of my many lessons in politics that day—how to deal with unexpected setbacks as calmly as possible.

Nilima also campaigned vigorously for me. She walked from door to door,

exhorting people to support me. Often, she would cover several miles in a single day. One day, as she stopped to talk to some women selling vegetables by the roadside, she asked them, 'Who are you going to vote for?'

They replied in unison, 'Indira Gandhi!'

When my wife reminded them that she was no more, they promptly retorted, '*Betwa toh hai*!' (Her son is still there!) At another place she was told, '*Bechara betwa tuar ho gaya hai. Usko jitana hai*!' (Her poor son has been orphaned. He must be made victorious!)

Similarly, a visit to a girls' hostel brought her face-to-face with a similar chorus, 'We want Rajiv Gandhi! We want Rajiv Gandhi!' Such was the popular sentiment at the time. Rajiv had become the darling of the people—a fact we did not grasp in time.

Ten days into the campaign, spacing between words feared having to halt my campaign for lack of money. Once again, Chandra Shekhar came to my rescue. He arrived in Hazaribagh to campaign for me and before leaving gave me enough money to see the election through. In a public meeting that he addressed, he declared that I was among the top three or four candidates in the whole country and the people of Hazaribagh should vote for me. They remained unimpressed.

Keshav Nandan Prasad, a friend from my school days, dealt a big blow to my ego by warning me that the chances of my victory were very slim. He was visiting me from Ranchi and had talked to people on the way. I argued furiously with him and asserted that I would win by a wide margin. I was genuinely convinced, from the reception I was getting and from the slogans that were raised in my presence, that the affection of the people was turning toward me.

It was only later that I realised how way off the mark I had been.

This taught me yet another valuable lesson in politics—the danger of looking only at the positives and ignoring the negatives.

On polling day, I was let down by almost everyone. Those who had taken money from me to man the booths were nowhere to be seen, even in Hazaribagh town. The other candidates resorted to unfair means wherever they could, and I could do nothing to prevent it. The election was clearly lost.

On the day of counting, I walked into the counting hall dressed in a 'bandgala' suit to look presentable before the assembled crowd.

The result was soon clear: I was losing the election and lose it miserably I did. Garnering a meagre total of approximately 10,500 votes. The Congress candidate won the election by a huge margin, with the CPI candidate coming in second. My only satisfaction was that Ramanika got even lesser number of votes than me—a mere 6,000 or so.

My first foray into electoral politics had resulted in a crushing defeat. Of course,

I could take heart from the fact that in the massive sympathy wave for Rajiv Gandhi the 'orphan', almost every non-Congress party leader had lost the election. Stalwarts like Chandra Shekhar, Atal Behari Vajpayee and a former CM of UP, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna, all had to bite the dust. Bahuguna, in fact, lost by a huge margin to Amitabh Bachchan in the Allahabad constituency.

The only windfall of the election, and not a minor one either, was that I had found a Lok Sabha constituency for myself right at the onset of my political career.

CHAPTER 15

GAINING A TOEHOLD

Back in Delhi, I was suddenly at a loose end. In all the excitement of the elections, I hadn't had the chance to grasp the gravity of the change in my life—from that of a salaried employee of the government to the truly unpredictable arena of politics. I had nothing to do—no work, nowhere to go and no friends to meet. Even my wife was tired of my being home all day. So, I decided to immerse myself in party work as much as I could.

Chandra Shekhar understood my plight and encouraged me to visit his home as well as the party office on New Delhi's Jantar Mantar Road regularly. I would visit him in the famous 'jhopri' (cottage), as his room was called. I met several important Janata Party leaders there, like George Fernandes, Madhu Dandavate, Biju Patnaik, Surendra Mohan, Ramakrishna Hegde and Indubhai Patel, to name a few.

At lunch time Chandra Shekhar would generously invite all those present to join him for a meal. Lunch was usually simple vegetarian fare, but I remember the chutney standing out, being very spicy and tasty. Sometimes when there were no other guests, Chandra Shekhar would even get a non-vegetarian dish, specially for me.

Rajiv Gandhi's massive win had dealt a severe blow to the morale of the non-Congress parties. The only practical way forward now was to reach out to the people all over again. Before doing that, the party cadres had to be re-activated and enthused. Chandra Shekhar decided to travel across the country, visit every state capital and rally Janata Party workers for future action. He decided to take me along with him on this month-long trip.

It was a very prestigious assignment because it involved vital stocktaking of the party's 'state of health' in every part of the country. The parameters to be studied included whether the party had an office in the state capital; whether the office itself had adequate staff, equipment and systems in place to deal with the workers and their issues its dealing with the public and media, as well as the availability of

funds, among other things.

Surendra Mohan—a well-known socialist leader who had been the general secretary of the party earlier and knew party workers in every state—offered me valuable advice on how to go about my task to prepare a worthwhile report. I gained a lot of exposure on that trip with Chandra Shekhar, as I met important leaders of the party from all over the country. It helped me understand the prevailing political situation and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the party in every state of India. Even though I kept a low profile as I always did, sitting behind Chandra Shekhar and taking notes during the meetings, everybody soon realised that I had a special position in the party, since I had joined it after quitting the IAS and enjoyed the trust of Chandra Shekhar.

The experience was extremely valuable and almost like a crash course in politics for me, but it was not without its sacrifices. I missed important family functions to continue the tour uninterrupted, even giving my niece's wedding a miss.

On my return, I drafted a comprehensive report. After Chandra Shekhar's approval, it was presented to the National Executive of the party for a final decision.

It was during this trip that I first met Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. We were visiting Jaipur and he had dropped in at the state guest-house to see Chandra Shekhar, with whom he was on extremely friendly terms. Chandra Shekhar introduced us, telling him that I had given up the IAS to join the Janata Party. Shekhawat looked me up and down and said, in a semi-serious voice, '*Utne pagal toh nahi dikhte hain*.' (He does not appear to be that insane.) We went on to become very good friends.

The Janata Party scored a creditable victory in the 1985 Karnataka assembly, and RK Hedge became the chief minister. Coming only a few months after our humiliating drubbing in the Lok Sabha polls, it proved to be a great morale booster and made Hegde a national celebrity almost overnight. After this victory, the party decided to hold an important 'chintan shivir' (brainstorming session) at Yercaud in Tamil Nadu, where Chandra Shekhar had a Bharat Yatra Kendra. All the important Janata Party leaders attended the camp that lasted for three days. I was made the rapporteur for an important group, with Madhu Dandavate as its chairperson.

Personally, Yercaud marked an important stage in my new career. The three

days I spent there gave me ample opportunity to rub shoulders with the party's top brass.

Back in Delhi, I regularly started going to the party office near Jantar Mantar. I prepared press statements for the party under the guidance of Bapu Kaldate. It was a delight to see the statements appear in the media, albeit under Bapu's name.

My preoccupation with politics had resulted in the greater neglect of my family and affairs at home. I still had no place to stay in Delhi. The government flat at Satya Marg had to be vacated soon. Luckily for me, my parents-in-law stepped in to support us during this crucial period. Jayant, who was quite close to his maternal grandparents, suggested that they allow us to build a couple of rooms in their house in Vasant Vihar where we could stay on a temporary basis.

My father-in-law offered the unbuilt second floor of his house for this purpose, an offer I promptly and gratefully accepted. I used a part of my retirement benefits to build two rooms and a kitchen there. However, since I was still short of funds, I decided to sell a Webley Scott pistol I had bought in Germany, not so much for protection but for its resale value. The moment to encash it had arrived.

My friend Dayanand Sahay offered to buy it from me for a sum of ₹20,000. Somehow Chandra Shekhar got wind of the transaction and showed up at our Satya Marg flat. Neither Nilima nor I were at home and Ashok, my son-in-law, was the only one present. He left an envelope with him. On opening it I found that it contained ₹20,000, with a note in Hindi saying, '*Pistaul mat bechna*!' (Don't sell the pistol!)

Chandra Shekhar's advice in the matter had come too late, however, since I had already given my word to Sahay. I desperately needed the money. I explained the situation to Chandra Shekhar, sold the pistol to Sahay and spent the entire amount on the construction of the tiny flat at my in-law's house. A couple of months later, we vacated our official Satya Marg accommodation and moved into the Vasant Vihar flat. Our major problem of accommodation was thus resolved, thanks to Nilima's father.

Fortunately, by now, my children were all leading their own lives, as I had envisaged when I decided to quit the IAS. My daughter Sharmila had just returned from China and her husband Ashok Kantha was posted in the MEA. They had their own small government flat where they were living happily. Jayant and Sumant, both were studying at IIT-Delhi and were living in the hostel. Sumant's National Talent Scholarship was a tremendous help, my financial situation being what it was.

Still, the year 1985 proved to be a difficult and frustrating one for me. My friends in government service had abandoned me completely. Hence, we hardly had any social life to speak of. It was the second time, in less than a year, that I felt

let down by the rest of the world, the first being when I had quit the IAS. Fortunately, the idle period proved to be short lived and ended in May 1986, when Chandra Shekhar was re-elected as the president of the Janata Party.

The dramatic election was held during the party's national convention at the Bharat Yatra Kendra in Parandwadi, near Pune. The group opposing Chandra Shekhar had fielded the saffron-clad politician Swami Agnivesh against him. He was obviously no match for Chandra Shekhar, who had a very strong support base among party workers. Of the 623 votes cast, 525 were for Chandra Shekhar and 83 for Swami Agnivesh, with 15 being declared invalid.[2] However, the fact that he was challenged at all and that there was a contest had unsettled many in the Chandra Shekhar camp, including me.

At the Pune meeting, party workers from Bihar and other states put a lot of pressure on Chandra Shekhar to appoint me as general secretary of the party. In fact, back in 1984, Karpoori Thakur had suggested a party post for me, keeping my background in mind. At that time, it might have looked like an out-of-the-way favour but by the time I was made general secretary in 1986, I had already built a significant support base within the party.

This was another valuable lesson for me—you must always act on the basis of consensus and not according to your own sweet will, especially in politics. Chandra Shekhar had waited for that consensus to emerge before he gave me the post.

The appointment gave me a huge fillip within the party and proved to be a significant landmark in my budding political career. Chandra Shekhar also gave me charge of the party headquarters, automatically making me the party spokesman also, in effect a post that had been held by Bapu Kaldate earlier.

The appointment proved to be a blessing for me in another way too, as my days no longer yawned ahead of me. I had a regular, brisk routine again, just like in my IAS days. Every morning, I would set off from my Vasant Vihar flat, armed with a tiffin carrier, and drive to my office at Jantar Mantar Road. This brought greater domestic peace to my life as well.

With my regular presence there, the number of visitors at the party office started going up. Word soon spread that at least 'Jaswant babu' would be there in office to offer any assistance to workers. Above all, I began feeling useful once again. Chandra Shekhar also started visiting the office more often. He was very informal with me and would often insist on sharing my lunch with all our colleagues who were present, with the result that I had to eventually ask Nilima to pack a bigger lunch for me!

I was also given charge of the northern states of J&K, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Chandigarh, and travelled

extensively to these places. My first visit was to Himachal Pradesh's Nahan. Shyama Sharma, a former MLA, was an important leader of the state and belonged to Nahan, where she arranged for a grand reception for me. For the first time, I felt like a leader of some import. Shyama continued to be a pillar of strength for me within the party.

Later, on a visit to Jammu, I decided to pay my obeisance to Mata Vaishno Devi. I was a heavy smoker in those days. As we waited in the Katra rest house, the general secretary of the party in J&K said, 'Sir, *aap bahut* cigarette *peete hain.*' (Sir, you smoke a lot.')

'You should not comment on people's personal habits,' I admonished him sternly.

The climb to the shrine was long and steep and, soon enough, I was breathless. Puffing and panting as I was, it became difficult for me to go on. All the while, the general secretary's remark on my smoking kept haunting me. I used to be an agile trekker and my breathlessness worried me. Clearly, I was out of shape and considered it a matter of great shame.

After four hours of trekking, we finally reached the sanctum sanctorum. Almost miraculously, I was overcome by a sudden urge never to smoke again and made a promise to myself to quit smoking forever. It is a vow I have honoured faithfully, to date.

Perhaps it was the goddess's blessing that made me keep my vow this time around, having made and broken several others on earlier occasions. Also, I owe a debt of gratitude to that general secretary in J&K whose stray remark had inspired the one I did eventually keep.

As general secretary in-charge of party headquarters, I was also the party's spokesperson, but I spoke only when required. No party in those days had a battery of spokespersons and the current practice of a party spokesperson addressing the media every day was not yet in vogue. As for television, there was only Doordarshan, which, like All India Radio or Akashvani (literally, 'Voice from the Sky'), was 'sarkari'. The private channels had not yet arrived. I met visiting journalists at the party office and issued press statements whenever needed. In fact, my first experience with the media as general secretary was not very pleasant.

Narayan Dutt Tiwari was the finance minister of India in those days. I was told that, in his budget of 1987, he had tweaked a certain tax rate in such a way that one

leading corporate house alone was going to benefit greatly. It was alleged that there was some quid pro quo as well. So, on the strength of this information, I decided to issue a press statement saying that the government was guided more by corporate interest than by people's interest.

Though the statement was issued to all the newspapers, no newspaper, except one, carried it the next day. This did not surprise me as much as the fact that the very same newspapers that had ignored my statement, prominently carried the rebuttal by a Congress Party leader the following day. He had vehemently criticised me for giving a supposedly mischievous statement, while justifying the decision of the FM and alleging that I had issued the statement out of frustration.

However, this was not the end of the matter. I later learnt that the young reporter responsible for publishing my statement in his newspaper was subsequently dismissed from service. Such was the power of that particular corporate house over the media in those days. I understand that this pressure has only increased manifold today, along with its many evil ramifications. In fact, now the corporates own the media.

So much for an independent, fair, impartial and fearless media in our country!

In fact, my experience with the media in India and elsewhere is so extensive and interesting that it could really be the subject matter of another book.

Back to party affairs. Chandra Shekhar was fond of Bangalore and visited it quite often and I would accompany him on some of these visits. On one such visit, my friend Mani also happened to be in the city at the same time. He had come to meet his parents who lived there. When he learnt that I was in town, he dropped in to meet me. Much to my surprise, he looked ill and not his usual self at all. His handsome face had become darker. When I asked him if anything was wrong, he disclosed that he had suffered from pleurisy, but from which he had fully recovered by then.

Mani also told me that he wanted to meet Chandra Shekhar, jokingly adding that even though Chandra Shekhar would surely be more impressed by him than he was by me, I should not worry as he had no intention of joining politics. I gladly obliged and took him to Chandra Shekhar, introducing him in glowing terms. Chandra Shekhar was happy to meet him, and Mani left feeling satisfied with the interaction.

As fate would have it, this was to be our last meeting. Sadly, I never saw my old friend Mani again.

My mother passed away in July 1986. When I had vacated our government flat in Delhi and shifted to my in-laws's house, she had returned to Patna and was living with my eldest sister and her family in my house in Rajendra Nagar. I used to visit Patna quite often to meet her and would drive further on to Hazaribagh from there in my brother-in-law's car, if available. My mother had not been keeping well for a while. She had an ischaemic heart but during my visit to Patna in July, I noticed that she was barely able to get out of bed. I had no idea, however, that the end was so near.

I left for Hazaribagh as usual, assuring her that I would spend some time with her upon my return. However, fate had willed otherwise. I never got to see her alive again. When I returned to Patna a few days later, I saw several cars lined up in front of our house. With a strong sense of foreboding, I entered the house only to have my worst fears confirmed. My mother was no more. She had breathed her last that morning. She was 84 when she left us.

All my brothers and sisters, except Ranjit, who was a doctor and lived in the US, reached Patna for her cremation. I lit the pyre and performed her last rites as her youngest son. I was filled with remorse, looking back at the life she had led. It had been fraught with hardship and difficulties all along. She had never seen affluence and had missed even the ordinary comforts of life later, when our financial situation had become precarious. My eldest brother, who suffered from epilepsy and other ailments, always stayed with her and had added to her suffering, needing constant care.

When my father was running the household, we were always short of money and it was often a hand-to-mouth existence. When he wound up his establishment in Patna, she was compelled to go and live with one son or another, along with her other children who were still dependent on her, no doubt increasing the burden on the son they all lived with. She was happiest living with us because of the accommodating and pleasant nature of my wife. However, to my eternal regret, she did not live to see the better times that awaited me and must have left the world worrying about my future.

My mother was a very gentle person, which was both her strength as well as her weakness. Her gentle and affectionate behaviour was a great help in caring for the family even in adverse circumstances. She was an excellent cook, an accomplished singer and an efficient home manager, and was a pillar of strength for all of us. Her gentle nature, however, led her to put up with a lot of unreasonableness that was often dished out to her by her own close relatives. She would rarely take issue with them, even when they told her things that were either wrong or even insulting. She was fond of her daughters-in-law, especially my wife, who matched her in gentleness.

I remember how when I brought my newly-wed wife to Patna to our small flat in Rajendra Nagar, there was much singing and celebration. But one custom aroused my curiosity. When I was going to the room where my wife was waiting for me—the Kohbar—my mother spread her *aanchal* (end of a sari) over my head as if to protect me until I reached the door of the room. When I asked her why she was doing it, she said that until then I had been in her care, and now she was transferring me to the care of my wife. Protection is not a one-way sheet in our culture, for the women protect us as much as we protect them.

Compared to my mother, my father was strong, full of courage and determination, fearless but also abrasive. He was lucky that his sons were good in studies but some of our cousins were not. One of my cousins had failed in his exam. I remember when he came to visit us, my father accosted him, saying 'I believe you failed in your examination.' My cousin never came to visit us again. He was direct like that.

We inherited the traits of our parents in varying degrees. Most of us discarded my father's abrasive ways but inherited his courage and fearlessness. Our mother taught us to be gentle, considerate, accommodating and patient. But we did not inherit her habit of suffering insults and humiliations in silence. Her passing away was an irreparable loss.

Chandra Shekhar specially sent Indubhai Patel to Patna with an extremely kind and comforting letter to console me after her death.

The following month, in August 1986, Jayant, who was in the US by then, informed us that he wished to marry his IIT-Delhi classmate, Punita Kumar. They had both completed their studies at IIT and had left for the US a year earlier for further studies. They planned to come to India in September and get married. We were aware of their friendship, so the decision did not come as a surprise. However, my mother had passed away merely a month ago and, according to tradition, one had to wait for at least a year before performing any auspicious ceremony in the family. However, since they were coming all the way from the US and would not be able to do so again any time soon, we decided to go ahead with the marriage after consulting the elders in our family.

The wedding was a very simple affair, also because I had very limited resources and could not even afford a separate reception for the newly-weds. So, I invited all my friends and colleagues, including Chandra Shekhar, to the reception of the

baraat at the bride's place. The wedding reception, held by Punita's father, Mr. Kumar, an engineer working in the government in a senior capacity, was attended by several important Janata Party leaders. Also, Chandra Shekhar's generosity came to the fore once again when he organised a reception for the bride and groom at Delhi's India International Centre.

The newly-weds returned to the US after a few days, where they were forced to lead an extremely austere life due to the limited financial resources available to them. Both had to work very hard to pay their college fees and make ends meet. Jayant worked nights at the reception of the building they lived in, and Punita taught *kathak* dance to children of Indian origin. I felt bad when I heard about their plight but there was little I could do to help, and they were left to fend for themselves.

In fact, both my sons struggled hard to earn enough to pay their fees and maintain themselves as students in the US, since I could not help them financially. While I may not have been the father I should have been, and have often left most of the parental responsibilities towards our children to be discharged by my wife, a welcome by-product has been the independence the kids have enjoyed in making their own decisions.

Jayant was clear about what he wanted to do in life and the decision to join IIT was entirely his. So was his decision to go to the US for higher studies as well as marry Punita. Sumant was also equally clear about his future. I was keen for him to join St. Stephen's College and study Economics and ultimately take the IAS examination. He did not agree with my line of thinking and also joined IIT instead. His decision to go to the US for higher studies was also his.

My daughter Sharmila, though gentle, had a strong mind of her own and there were occasions when she did exactly what she wanted to, despite our reservations. Like going to the 'Valley of Flowers' on a trek and getting held up on the way back because of an avalanche. She joined the Bank of India as a probationary officer entirely on her own merit by passing the qualifying examination. While she had to give up her career in banking because of the foreign postings of her husband Ashok, she found another interesting vocation by joining the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) as a consultant and working for them from wherever she was in the world.

My role in my children's success has been almost non-existent. But I am proud of their achievements. In fact, they had to learn to be independent and stand on their own feet from an early age, during their student days in the US, especially my sons.

Coming back to politics, RK Hegde had arrived on the national scene as a force to be reckoned with. He had a larger-than-life presence, following his impressive victory in the Karnataka assembly elections in the face of the prevailing Rajiv Gandhi wave. Media briefings that I conducted following the meetings of the National Executive, focused mainly on Hegde. The media was only interested in knowing what he had to say and seemed to have no time for, or interest in, any other party leader at that time. As a result, Chandra Shekhar and other leaders were completely side-lined. Hegde's Delhi visits received wide media coverage and he gradually acquired centre stage, becoming a rallying point against Rajiv Gandhi.

An interesting episode I recall is receiving an invite by Hegde to an important political meeting at Delhi's Karnataka Bhawan. On reaching there, I found myself in the company of several important leaders of the Opposition. I wondered why I had actually been invited for such a meeting, before learning that the invite had actually been for Jaswant Singh of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), who later became a dear colleague. Thus, my elation at being invited by Hegde to an important meeting was quite short-lived.

Actually, I was still finding my feet in politics and was far from acquiring a political personality of my own. At this stage, I was known only as someone who enjoyed Chandra Shekhar's confidence and nothing more. I still had to prove my political mettle. An opportunity of sorts soon presented itself.

In September 1987, an unseemly controversy erupted over an incident of sati in Rajasthan, which hit the Janata Party especially badly. A pretty, 18-year-old young bride of eight months, Roop Kanwar, committed 'sati' or self-immolation after the death of her husband at Deorala village in the Sikar district of Rajasthan.

The reaction across the country was an unreserved mix of shock, outrage and horror over the young girl's action. Women's groups demonstrated against sati all over India, prompting belated government action against Roop Kanwar's relatives. Yet, private opinion, even of prominent politicians, was ambivalent. The incident had taken place despite an anti-sati law in place, as well as sustained opposition from women's groups.

Normally, the event would have occupied media attention for some time, and the law would have taken its own course, but things did not turn out that way. In fact, Roop Kanwar generated a wave of sympathy among the people and the funeral site became a place of pilgrimage, with thousands flocking to it to pay obeisance to 'sati mata'. The Kshatriya community, especially, came out in open

support of the practice. Kalyan Singh Kalvi, who was a prominent Janata Party leader in Rajasthan, as well as the party's state president, emerged as the leader of this movement.

It is not a mere coincidence then, that his son Lokendra Singh Kalvi is today a leading activist lobbying for the cause of Rajputs, including protests against the 2018 film *Padmaavat.*

Of course, the liberals throughout the country, and within the Janata Party, protested vehemently. Kalvi incurred the wrath of the liberal and socialist leaders in the party following his visit to the 'sati shrine' to pay his respects the day after the event. Socialist elements in the party, led by Madhu Dandavate, George Fernandes, Surendra Mohan and MS Gurupadaswamy started gunning for Kalvi's expulsion.

Chandra Shekhar seemed reluctant to take such an extreme step and it seemed that the party was heading for a split. The situation was so grave that a National Executive meeting was specially convened at Parliament House annexe to consider the matter. Being in the forefront of affairs, I tried my best to douse the fire with help from some of the other leaders. Though I was close to Kalvi and did not favour his expulsion, I was strongly against the practice of sati and had condemned the Deorala incident, in particular.

Chandra Shekhar tried his best to keep the party united and worked diligently to do so behind the scenes. Kalvi was a tall, well-built and soft-spoken gentleman who always sported a Rajasthani turban. I advised him to keep his mouth shut, whatever be the provocation at the National Executive Committee meeting, realising just how volatile the situation was and how tempers were running high. Kalvi was at the receiving end of strong criticism in the meeting but it goes to his credit that he followed my advice and kept his cool in the face of the severest provocation. He did not utter a single word.

The meeting turned out to be more tumultuous than expected. Not only the socialists but other members were also thirsting for Kalvi's blood. Chandra Shekhar gave everyone a fair chance to speak. At the end of the meeting, Chandra Shekhar asked Gurupadaswamy, with whom an understanding had been reached earlier, to prepare a statement on the issue that could be adopted by the National Executive. Gurupadaswamy's draft, while condemning sati and its supporters in the strongest terms, stopped short of suggesting Kalvi's expulsion. The resolution was adopted unanimously by the National Executive.

Everyone heaved a huge sigh of relief. However, Chandra Shekhar could not contain the relief he must have felt and made a remark that set off yet another controversy. He said, '*Dekha, sab theek thaak ho gaya na? Kuchh log samajhte the ki samaajvaad khatre mein hai!*' (See, everything has been settled, right? And

some people thought that socialism was in danger.') At this, Surendra Mohan almost exploded and retorted, 'What do you mean by implying that we thought socialism was in danger?' He stood up and shouted at Chandra Shekhar, who smiled in embarrassment and apologetically explained it was a light-hearted remark that should not be taken otherwise.

However, Surendra would have none of it and strode off toward the door. I jumped up and held him back forcibly. Being frail and slight, he could not shake off my grip and shouted at me to let him go. I said, as firmly as possible, 'The entire media is waiting outside! What will they say if they see you in this mood? What will be left to the reputation of the party?' Realising that he would not be able overpower me, he quietly walked back to his seat.

After the meeting, I briefed the media, leaving out the unpalatable details. This is how the sati controversy was resolved within the party.

Later in 1989, I was deputed by Chandra Shekhar to conduct the elections for choosing the Janata Party's leader in the Rajasthan legislative assembly. This was a tough call as the party was split down the middle between the socialists, on the one hand, and those led by Kalyan Singh Kalvi, on the other. I reached the party office in Jaipur to see a huge crowd waiting for me. The place was pulsating with excitement and it took all my political and skills to conduct a smooth election.

I announced the procedure that I planned to follow, opting to sit in a separate room and call each MLA individually to seek his or her opinion, in confidence. I asked them to demonstrate a united front to the outside world, to which they all agreed. I had a piece of paper that had the names of the MLAs printed on it on which I privately recorded their individual views on the two candidates, Kalyan Singh Kalvi and Master Kedar.

In the end, the count revealed that the majority had favoured Kalvi. So, I called the other candidate and suggested to him that he should propose the name of the winner in the meeting of the legislators that was to be held soon after. He agreed, and we could successfully present a united front in the eyes of the world. Kalvi was elected as the leader of the legislature party, unopposed. The episode gave me greater confidence to deal with trickier political issues.

Also, by then I was already writing the next chapter of my budding political career.

CHAPTER 16

VANTAGE POINT: JANATA PARTY TO JANATA DAL, AND THE RISE OF VP SINGH

The Rajya Sabha elections were due in early 1988. The Janata Party did not have enough members in the Bihar Assembly to get even one candidate elected to Rajya Sabha. So, Chandra Shekhar chalked out a strategy under which we forged an alliance with the BJP for both the Rajya Sabha and Legislative Council elections in Bihar. Combining forces, we could elect one candidate to each House. BJP decided to put up their senior leader, Jagbandhu Adhikari, for the Legislative Council and I was selected to contest the Rajya Sabha seat. Since the number of candidates exceeded the number of seats, elections were held in March 1988.

Despite being confident that the numbers were in my favour, I did not want to take any chances and worked extremely hard. I met every MLA from the Janata Party, BJP and many others who were unattached in the election. All this finally paid off, for I not only won the election but also managed to get the largest number of votes among all the candidates, which included stalwarts like Sitaram Kesri and Jagannath Mishra.

My friend Dayanand Sahay was also elected as a candidate of the Congress party from Bihar, and Kamal Morarka, another close confidante of Chandra Shekhar and a reputed industrialist, was elected from Rajasthan. So, it was with quite a clutch of friends that I entered the Rajya Sabha that year.

By becoming a Rajya Sabha member, I had almost reached the pinnacle of my political career within a very short time. It was only when I entered Parliament and sat in India's most influential club – the Central Hall of Parliament – that I realised what I had missed in the three years since I had joined politics. Being a Rajya Sabha MP entitled me to some creature comforts as well, like a house in Lutyens' Delhi and a decent monthly salary. Helped by my friend RUS Prasad and his boss, Buta Singh, who was India's home minister at the time, I managed to get an

independent bungalow at Feroze Shah Road. Railway travel in AC First Class was free and I could also travel by air, enjoying several other privileges as well.

Most of the comforts that I had enjoyed as an IAS officer, and a few more, became available to me once again. Peace returned at home and those who had thought that I was finished for good started seeking me out again. Others who used to look through me or had refused to recognise me during the lean period of my life not only started recognising me again, but even began offering unsolicited advice on various national issues I could raise in Parliament. There is no dearth of such fair-weather friends in the world; you only have to identify them and take their 'friendship' with a large pinch of salt.

I took all this in my stride, as I always have in my life. You may call it arrogance or overconfidence, but I have always felt that the good luck that came my way was well-deserved, that I was entitled to it. All I had to do was plunge into the task at hand with the greatest sincerity. I have taken the setbacks in my stride and never considered them insurmountable. Perhaps that is the reason why my life has been a continuous struggle.

My changed political fortunes gave the Janata Party in Hazaribagh enough reason to celebrate. My friends and family were happy for me, and my elevation to the Rajya Sabha was welcomed by sections in the media as well. Keith Flory of *The Statesman* even wrote a flattering article about my impactful presence in the Upper House.

Had I finally arrived? My political fortunes were not at their peak, but at least I knew I was here to stay.

MS Gurupadaswamy, our party's leader in Rajya Sabha, was a thorough gentleman. Though not formally designated as such, he occupied the Leader of the Opposition's seat as the leader of the largest party in opposition. An extremely fair person, he provided ample opportunity to Kamal Morarka and me to participate in important debates. We also used other parliamentary devices to make our voice heard, and soon emerged as active and prominent members of the House. I also continued as the general secretary of the party.

The late 1980s were a time of tumult, to say the least, and I was witness to the interesting twists and turns that Indian politics was taking. As already noted, Rajiv Gandhi had secured a majority for his party in the Lok Sabha following the 1984 elections as no prime minister before him had. His popularity was at its peak in the

early years of his rule. I remember reading a letter to the editor of a Hindi magazine *Dharmayug*, in which a working woman wrote that she felt completely refreshed seeing Rajiv Gandhi's face on TV in the evening when she returned home after a long, hard day at work.

However, the Bofors scandal that broke in April 1987 made Rajiv Gandhi increasingly unpopular and provided a golden opportunity for the opposition parties to join hands and take advantage of the situation. The Janata Party, being the largest party in opposition—and its leaders who had been languishing after the massive defeat in the elections—suddenly found enough to do and busied themselves in opposing the Congress. Meanwhile, the ruling Congress party was riven with internal dissensions.

It was amid all this turmoil and political uncertainty that a leader was born, who would go on to become one of India's most controversial political figures, as the next few years saw the rise and rise of Vishwanath Pratap Singh.

VP Singh, the then finance minister, was proving to be inconvenient to Rajiv Gandhi in the Ministry of Finance. He was soon divested of the charge and moved to the defence ministry, which he did not like, so he occupied himself with unearthing one defence purchase scam after another. The most important was, of course, the 1987 Bofors scam that was instrumental in toppling the Rajiv Gandhi government later on.

The Bofors scandal, which involved buying 155 mm field howitzer guns from Sweden, brought to light the fact that kickbacks had been paid by Bofors to various people in India and abroad to secure the deal. Rajiv Gandhi, who had enjoyed the image of Mr. Clean in the early years of his tenure, was completely out-manoeuvred by VP Singh. Singh also exposed a scam involving the purchase of HDW submarines from Germany, also in 1987. In fact, Rajiv Gandhi was replaced as Mr. Clean by VP Singh himself.

Rajiv removed VP Singh as defence minister following which the latter resigned both from the Congress Party and the Lok Sabha. VP Singh soon formed a new group called the Jan Morcha. His supporters included Arun Nehru, Ram Dhan, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, Arif Mohammad Khan and a few other Congress rebels. Singh soon emerged as the rallying point for all parties in opposition to the Congress. All other leaders faded into insignificance after his emergence.

Singh also became an instant hero of the masses immediately after his resignation from the government. He soon started moving around the country and undertook hectic tours to address huge public meetings wherever he went. Not only did his Jan Morcha colleagues join him on these but parties like the Lok Dal and the Janata Party supported his rallies whole-heartedly. Even Chandra Shekhar and I joined him for a few meetings that he held in Bihar.

Sometimes, I would even travel long distances to participate in these meetings. I specially remember a Motihari meeting of VP Singh's. I was attending a meeting of the district executive of the Janata Party, held at Banaso near Bishnugarh in Hazaribagh, either in late 1987 or early 1988. Hukmdev Narayan Yadav was the state president of the party and had come to attend the meeting at my request. We had a tight schedule as the very next day we were supposed to be in Motihari to attend VP Singh's rally. We finished the Hazaribagh meeting in the evening and left for Muzaffarpur in my car.

We drove through the night but were impeded by thick fog after Bihar Sharif. We had not had our dinner and were very hungry. Just outside Patna city, we stopped at the brick kiln of my old school friend Mahtab Lal. We woke him up, but unfortunately, there was nothing to eat at his place either at that hour of the night. I remember having to make do with some hot milk that Mahtab served us which was as refreshing as it was welcome.

Proceeding to Muzaffarpur, we reached the Circuit House in the wee hours of the morning. There was neither a vacant room nor anyone around to help us. The drawing room was open, where a few constables were sleeping on the floor. A few blankets, which I always carried with me, came in handy and we settled down to sleep in a corner of the open drawing room. In the morning, we used the room of some friends who were staying there to freshen up and get ready. The point is, we were willing to go through all this trouble only to attend VP Singh's meetings.

VP Singh addressed many mammoth rallies in North Bihar on that trip. Chandra Shekhar was present as well but, clearly, Singh was the toast of the town. Once again, this only served to reinforce how he had stolen a march over other national leaders of the non-Congress parties.

I came face to face with his popularity, once again, in a *padyatra* that I undertook from Gaya to Rajgir in Bihar around this time, a distance of about sixty kilometres. Chandra Shekhar was holding a meeting of the National Executive of the party at a Bharat Yatra Kendra near Nagpur. The meeting was supposed to be preceded by *padyatras* undertaken by party leaders in various parts of the country. Some of them even walked all the way to Nagpur. I had already completed one from Bhetiharwa, in Champaran district (where Mahatma Gandhi had established his *ashram* during the Indigo agitation against the British), to the Mahila Charkha Samiti in Patna, which was where Jaiprakash Narayan had stayed while in Patna.

For me, the symbolism of the journey was clear—from Gandhi to JP. During the journey from Gaya to Rajgir, I passed through many Rajput villages. People turned up in large numbers to welcome me, but I noticed that their most enthusiastic 'zindabad' slogans were reserved for VP Singh alone and not for their other fellow Rajput Chandra Shekhar.

Meanwhile, Devi Lal of the Lok Dal had already won the assembly elections in Haryana and become the state's chief minister in July 1987 for the second time. He and his party had lent full support to VP Singh, only adding to the groundswell of support for him from within the Janata Party. Even though Chandra Shekhar was not particularly enamoured of Singh, all the socialists within the Janata Party, as well as RK Hegde, began cultivating the soft-spoken 'Raja Saheb', as he was often called by his supporters. At a National Executive meeting of the party, even George Fernandes remarked, 'Had there been no VP Singh, we would have had to invent one.'

Chandra Shekhar became increasingly isolated within the party on the issue of support to Singh. The media soon started baiting Chandra Shekhar with a vengeance, asking provocative questions like, 'Do you accept VP Singh as your leader?' They were helped along in their mission every time Chandra Shekhar lost his temper and made off-the-cuff remarks that, in turn, fed into adverse newspaper headlines against him the following day.

While I attended VP Singh's public rallies, I chose to keep my distance from him and did not call on him personally for a long time, unlike many others who made a beeline to see him or be seen with him. This was a time of fast-moving political developments and intrigues. Singh was trying for the merger of the Lok Dal, the Janata Party and his own Jan Morcha into a single party. Given the support base he had acquired within the Janata Party, and Chandra Shekhar's resistance to the merger, it appeared as if the party would split, with a sizeable section deciding to merge with the new party that VP Singh was seeking to form. It was at this stage that I decided the time had come for me to have a personal meeting with him.

When we finally met, I told him rather bluntly that the merger of the entire Janata Party with his new one would be a better proposition than the merger of merely a faction of it. He agreed with me on this, but my other suggestion did not receive a positive response from him. When I asked him to try and persuade Chandra Shekhar's detractors within the party not to precipitate matters, and enable Chandra Shekhar to prepare the entire party to merge with the party he had in mind, Singh replied plainly, 'It is your internal matter. How can I interfere in it?' Clearly, he did not mind if the Janata joining him without Chandra Shekhar. Such was their dislike for each other.

However, the rumblings within the Janata Party were a cause of worry for Chandra Shekhar. His leadership had come under strong attack and he desperately needed to silence his critics and re-establish his authority within the party. Ajit Singh, Chaudhary Charan Singh's son, had returned from the US and donned the political mantle of his father, who had passed away in May 1987. The Lok Dal had split into two factions with one being led by Ajit Singh [Lok Dal (A)] and the other

by Devi Lal [Lok Dal (B)].

Chandra Shekhar perhaps thought that reaching out to Ajit Singh and merging the Lok Dal with the Janata Party would be an astute political move. So, he started sending feelers to Ajit Singh. A senior journalist, Rajinder Puri, whom I was also quite friendly with, arranged a meeting between Ajit Singh and me. Meanwhile, Subramaniam Swamy, who had joined Ajit and become the general secretary of his party, was assisting him in the negotiations. Together we played a major role in the negotiations for the merger. The final press note was also drafted by us.

After the merger, Ajit Singh became president of the combined Janata Party. However, I was left out of the arrangement as he did not offer me any post in the new formation. He also got rid of Kamal Morarka as treasurer. His new team consisted, among others, of Subramaniam Swamy as general secretary and Jayant Malhotra, a businessman from Bangalore, as treasurer.

Relieved of my party responsibilities, I decided to focus on my parliamentary duties instead. The Janata Party soon held a convention that Chandra Shekhar organised on the lawns of the Constitution Club where a resolution was unanimously adopted to merge the Janata Party in a new Party to be formed later. Soon, a combined convention of the workers of the Janata Party, Lok Dal, Jan Morcha and others was held in Bangalore to form the Janata Dal. VP Singh became the president of the new party.

Subramaniam Swamy and Syed Shahabuddin had their own reasons to be disenchanted with the formation of the Janata Dal. I had supported them for a while in the beginning only to strengthen Chandra Shekhar's hand, but when I realised that this meant our not joining the Janata Dal, I withdrew myself from this group. Swamy and Shahabuddin decided not to join the Janata Dal and keep the Janata Party alive instead.

My luck turned once again when I was appointed as one of the general secretaries of the new party. Working with VP Singh was not easy. Even though we had merged into a single party, the various factions were still easily identifiable. As a result, the Janata Dal lacked cohesion and an effective working style. Seeking to redress this, RK Hegde took the initiative by inviting some of us to Bangalore for a meeting. He carefully chose the invitees, with each one representing an important faction of the party: Arun Nehru, Sharad Yadav, Ajit Singh and I. Together we pondered over how to steer the party through the challenges it was facing. Everybody felt the need to strengthen the party headquarters, for starters.

Ajit Singh was the party's secretary general but he had neither the time nor the inclination to shoulder the administrative or political responsibility of running the party headquarters. So, it was decided that I should take charge of the HQ. It was also decided that top leaders of the party like VP Singh, Devi Lal and Chandra

Shekhar should be persuaded to agree that all critical issues before the party be first discussed in a small group comprising the five of us, and only then presented to them or the appropriate body for approval. The arrangement, once agreed upon, worked extremely well for the party. I assumed charge of the party headquarters and the staff was happy to see me back.

Upon my return, I soon became aware of the pitiful state of the party's finances. The staff had not been paid their salaries for several months. The situation had reached a point where we could not even afford to provide a cup of tea to visitors. I was further informed that there was some cash in the party's bank account, from which we could disburse at least a month's salary to the staff. For this to happen, however, a resolution needed to be passed by the National Executive of the party to authorise some of the office-bearers to operate the bank account. Normally, the account was operated under the joint signatures of at least two of the three office bearers authorised for the purpose, namely, the treasurer of the party, the general secretary (headquarters) and the party president himself. However, in the absence of such a resolution, the president was authorised to withdraw money under his signature.

I rang VP Singh and told him, 'I am sending the cashier with a cheque for you to sign. The staff has not been paid their salaries for four months. We can at least pay them a month's salary.' His reply left me stunned, 'I do not sign cheques.' Even though I pleaded that it was an emergency, VP Singh refused to budge. Ultimately, I had to fall back on my friend, Kamal Moraka, to arrange for some cash to pay the staff's salaries. I apprised the party leadership of our precarious financial situation, with the result that Devi Lal and some of the others offered to help on a regular basis. Consequently, the party's National Executive passed the required resolution authorising regular withdrawals from the party's bank account. Normalcy was further restored when Kamal Morarka was re-appointed as the treasurer.

Devi Lal became the chairman of the Parliamentary Board of the party and started playing a very important role in its affairs. His two sons, Om Prakash Chautala and Ranjit Singh, were always vying for their father's favour and competing to prove their relative closeness to him to the rest of the world. Ranjit Singh would often visit the party office. On one such visit, he remarked how the office was not properly furnished. I retorted, pointing to our hapless situation, that since we did not even have enough funds to provide tea to visitors, how could we afford proper furnishing? He offered to help and soon we had new curtains, carpets and furniture in the office, significantly improving its overall look.

With regular meetings of our group of five, which I will henceforth refer to as the G-5, the process of taking policy decisions also became smoother. Leaders like

VP Singh, Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lal had given us enough authority to enable us to take decisions in the interest of the party. Ajit Singh and RK Hegde, who were part of this G-5, were leaders of their own factions, which made things easier.

Quite often, the National Executive of the party, the Parliamentary Board and the Election Committee were only asked to put their seal of approval on decisions that had already been taken by the G-5. It proved to be a brilliant device to make the faction-ridden Janata Dal function smoothly, based on consensus. There were occasions when I even went along with a decision that Chandra Shekhar did not like.

Meanwhile, the old symbol of a farmer with a plough had remained with the rump of the Janata Party. The Janata Dal (JD) now had to look for a new election symbol. As general secretary of the party in charge of headquarters, a special responsibility thus fell upon my shoulders.

Ultimately, we chose a completely new symbol for the party—the 'wheel', signifying progress and advancement. We did have to make some changes to distinguish our symbol from the wheel of a famous detergent maker! All the top leaders of the party, including its president VP Singh, went to the Election Commission to persuade it to accept the wheel as our new symbol. The EC obliged, and we came back delighted. I remember that a photograph of Jaipal Reddy and me, displaying the new symbol, was published in all the newspapers the following day.

By then, preparations for the general elections had reached fever pitch. The party leadership was keen to arrive at an electoral understanding with the Bharatiya Janata Party. An 'in principle' agreement emerged after discussions between the top leaders of the two parties. Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, general secretary of the BJP, and I were entrusted with the duty of working out the details of this agreement.

But VP Singh was hard to please. He had, in the meantime, reached an understanding with some Muslim leaders and the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid to secure the Muslim votes for his new party. Therefore, he was reluctant to publicly display JD's understanding with the BJP. He went to the extent of getting BJP flags removed from the election meetings he addressed and made it a point not to campaign for BJP candidates.

By now, however, there was a clear wave in favour of VP Singh and the Janata Dal had a reasonably good chance for its candidates to win the election. Though I was already in Rajya Sabha, I was keen to contest either from Patna or Hazaribagh, but as general secretary in charge of party headquarters and as its spokesman, my job in Delhi was also very important and interesting. Besides, to contest, I would have to give up my Delhi responsibilities. I was reluctant to do so and, therefore,

decided to give up the idea of contesting the 1989 general election.

In the Lok Sabha polls held in November 1989, the Congress Party was the biggest loser but, alas, there were also no clear winners. Despite the hype created by the rebellion of VP Singh and his colleagues, and the consequent formation of the Janata Dal, we could only secure 143 seats. The BJP won 85 and the Left parties [CPI and CPI(M)] won a combined total of 45 seats. Together, the non-Congress parties had a majority with 273 seats, but this also meant that the BJP and Left parties would have to come together and support a Janata Dal government.

This was a difficult task, but not an impossible one, considering the prevailing national sentiment against the Congress. The Congress did not even stake its claim to form the next government, while we managed to get letters of support from both the BJP and the Left parties. However, before VP Singh could go to Rashtrapati Bhavan and stake a claim to form the next government, he had to be formally elected leader of the Janata Dal parliamentary party.

It was a foregone conclusion and should have been a routine affair. Yet it turned out to be more dramatic than anyone had expected.

After the declaration of the election results VP Singh had gone to Fatehpur, his constituency in UP, for a visit. He returned to Delhi late at night and telephoned me to come to his place, saying he had some important matters to discuss. I had already gone to bed but quickly changed and drove to his bungalow in Lodhi Estate only to find the drawing room, where we generally met, ringed by lights and cameras. I was asked to wait, as VP Singh was in the middle of an interview with the BBC. The interview was soon over and out walked Mark Tully. He told me that he had recorded a very important interview with Singh who had said he would not accept the post of prime minister but would continue to work for the party instead.

This came as a complete surprise to me. When I met Singh, he confirmed that he had, indeed, made such a statement. I protested, saying that he never should have made that statement as it amounted to a betrayal of all those who had placed their trust in him. He remained unimpressed. As we were to find out later, this had merely been a ploy to lead everyone up the garden path, only for him to strike a hammer blow at the end.

Singh was acutely aware of the fact that Chandra Shekhar had not made peace with his leadership and had been desperately working behind the scenes to scuttle his election as leader of the parliamentary party. Chandra Shekhar had been in

touch with Devi Lal and his son Om Prakash Chautala and had persuaded the Haryana strongman to become the leader of the legislature party himself, as well as the prime minister of India. What's more, he had not even taken his closest supporters, including me, into confidence regarding his strategy.

Had he done so, I would surely have urged him not to pursue this perilous path as it completely went against the popular sentiment prevailing at the time. An experience that my close friend and party colleague Digvijay Singh of Banka had a day before the election proved this beyond any doubt. He had gone to a *paan* shop on New Delhi's Janpath with a few friends. The *paan wala* must have guessed from their conversation that they belonged to the Janata Dal and asked them casually, 'Who is going to be your prime minister?' to which Digvijay replied, 'Devi Lal'. The *paan wala* immediately snatched the *paan* he had already offered him and shouted, 'In that case, go eat your *paan* somewhere else!'

On the fateful day of the election, I was busy with the arrangements for the meeting of the parliamentary party to be held in the Central Hall of Parliament. Separately, the top leaders of the JD, including Chandra Shekhar, had assembled in Orissa Bhawan to discuss the leadership issue. Arun Nehru, with the full knowledge of VP Singh, had already prepared a plan to double cross Chandra Shekhar. So, when he suggested that Devi Lal be elected the leader, everyone agreed, including Devi Lal himself.

Once the decision was taken, all of them came to the Central Hall. Since I was completely unaware of what had transpired at Orissa Bhawan, and still believed that VP Singh would be elected the leader, I casually asked Chandra Shekhar, 'Whose name should I propose for presiding over the meeting?' I was flabbergasted when he replied, 'Vishwanath *ko bolo*.'

'But he is a candidate for election. How can he preside over the meeting?' I asked.

Chandra Shekhar's reply left me even more baffled. '*Woh* candidate *honge tab na*?'

I was thoroughly confused but did not act on Chandra Shekhar's advice. Instead, I used my own judgement and proposed that Madhu Dandavate preside over the meeting. Someone quickly seconded it and Dandavate assumed the presidentship of the meeting. He then called upon the assembled gathering to propose names for the post of leader of the parliamentary party. Chandra Shekhar proposed the name of Devi Lal and someone seconded the proposal. No other name was proposed.

There was stunned silence in the hall. Dandavate declared Devi Lal elected, who then rose to make his acceptance speech. In his brief address, he said that while he was grateful to the MPs for electing him as their leader, he felt that VP

Singh was more suitable for the post. Thus, he added, he would like to propose his name instead. The announcement was met with thunderous applause from the gathered MPs. Dandavate declared VP Singh elected unopposed as the leader and the meeting ended in a celebratory mood. Chandra Shekhar was left stunned and isolated, after what can only be described as a veritable coup.

It was on that day that the Janata Dal abandoned the consensual approach that had guided all its actions thus far. The G-5 had played a critical role in establishing that consensus but the G-5, as subsequent events would show, was itself given the boot after the party won the election and was called upon to form the government. Consensus was replaced by conspiracy, dialogue with deceit and goodwill with guile. More was to follow later, but the seeds of the Janata Dal's unravelling were sown that day in the Central Hall of Parliament.

The countdown to its destruction had begun.

CHAPTER 17

AN OATH UNTAKEN

VP Singh was sworn in as the prime minister of India on 2 December 1989 at the helm of the National Front coalition government, with Devi Lal as his deputy.

Cabinet formation was the next task before Singh. Soon after he was sworn in, he asked me to meet him at his residence. In our meeting, while he did not disclose all the names he had in mind, he shared names of people from Bihar whom he wanted to include in his Council of Ministers. I gave him my frank and sincere advice.

Confident of the vital role I had played in the victory of the party, I was certain I would be included in the Cabinet. So, I was not surprised when he asked me to come to Rashtrapati Bhawan the following day, 5 December at 11 a.m. to take oath. This was in line with my thinking that my claim could not be ignored.

But I was in for the shock of my life.

The next day, I received a call from the Cabinet Secretariat asking me to come to Rashtrapati Bhawan at 5 p.m. to take oath. 'I see; it has been postponed from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.,' I told the person at the other end, trying to show that I was generally aware of the goings on. I had told my family of the latest developments. My father-in-law had come to our house on Feroze Shah Road, and people had already started sending me bouquets of flowers. The usual crowd of hangers on during such occasions was also present. Nilima, Sumant and my nephew Rajesh accompanied me on the journey as I drove my Maruti 800 to Rashtrapati Bhawan in the afternoon.

As we walked from the parking lot towards Rashtrapati Bhawan, I was accosted by a posse of media persons who had not been allowed entry into the Durbar Hall where the oath-taking ceremony was to take place. They were complaining loudly and protesting the attitude of the Rashtrapati Bhawan staff, and I promised to take up their case as I walked into the building.

At the entrance, I was given some papers that included a letter from the then cabinet secretary, TN Seshan. As we walked down the long South Corridor inside

the building, towards the Durbar Hall, I opened the envelope to look at its contents. I had seen many letters of appointment, transfers and postings in my administrative career, but I was curious to see what a letter of appointment for a minister looked like.

I felt my heart sink as I read it.

It said that the President of India was pleased to appoint me as a minister of state in the Council of Ministers on the advice of the prime minister. I did not have much time to think as I was already late, but I remember making up my mind in exactly ten seconds. VP Singh was not being fair to me, I felt. I could not accept the post of a junior minister, given my seniority in the party and the role I had played in running the election campaign. I spun around and caught my wife's arm. 'Let's go back!' I said in a hushed but firm tone.

Shocked at my words, everyone wanted to know the reason for our turning back. 'What happened?' asked Sumant. 'But why?' queried my wife. 'Go back? What does it mean?' added Rajesh.

'I'll tell you later,' I replied in a strained voice. Turning around, I saw Ajit Singh who was right behind us, on his way to the Durbar Hall. He also asked me what the matter was, and I gave him the same reply.

Our return journey towards the car had to be carefully negotiated as the media persons were still waiting outside and I did not wish to interact with them at that time. I took cover behind a pillar and sent my nephew Rajesh to fetch the car. We managed to dodge the media and quickly drove back home. On the way, I told the family why I had walked out. Back at home, I explained it all again to my father-in-law who was surprised to see us back so soon. The usual crowd of well-wishers had already started gathering at my place. I wanted to avoid them as well.

My absence from the Durbar Hall had not gone unnoticed as the ceremony was being broadcast live on TV. My close friend and colleague, Harmohan Dhawan—Lok Sabha MP from Chandigarh and a devoted follower of Chandra Shekhar—had guessed that something was very wrong. He drove straight to my place. Since I was keen to get away myself, we decided to drive to Bhondsi where Chandra Shekhar had a Bharat Yatra Kendra. Chandra Shekhar himself had also noticed my absence.

I explained the reasons why I felt I had to walk away from the ceremony. Dhawan and other friends who were present criticised VP Singh for further humiliating Chandra Shekhar by not making me, his closest and senior-most follower, a cabinet minister. Chandra Shekhar congratulated me on the firm stand I had taken.

I returned home late at night. My wife informed me that many people had dropped in to see me, including some important leaders of the Janata Dal. The media had almost ransacked the house, I was told, and the telephone had never

stopped ringing. She was upset with me for having deserted her to manage the situation alone.

Soon after my return, Arif Mohammed Khan, who had already been sworn in as a cabinet minister, paid me a visit. He had come to explain VP Singh's decision. 'Raja Saheb wants to give the home portfolio to Mufti Mohammed Sayeed. He wants you as minister of state in the home ministry, in charge of internal security, like Arun Nehru was under Rajiv Gandhi. I do not have to tell you how important that charge is in the government, especially now,' he told me.

I was not impressed. I told Arif that the arrangement was not acceptable, as I was the senior-most associate of Chandra Shekhar in the Janata Dal and if I accepted the post of a minister of state, clearly no one would represent his group in the Cabinet. 'It is not about me', I told him, 'Above all, it is a further insult to Chandra Shekhar.'

Arif left, clearly disappointed.

Chiman Bhai Patel, the chief minister and tallest leader of Gujarat at the time, dropped in to see me after Arif left. Again, I explained my point of view to him and he went back fully convinced that the stand I had taken was correct.

Early the next morning, Som Pal, one of VP Singh's closest confidants, arrived at my place. He woke me up and asked me to quickly change and accompany him to Singh's place. I was reluctant but Som Pal refused to take 'no' for an answer and finally persuaded me to go with him. The prime ministerial 'bandobast' was fully in place when we arrived at Singh's house. He had given up his usual simple dress of kurta and pyjama and was attired in a sherwani, pyjamas and his signature Kashmiri fur cap. The adjoining bungalow had already been taken over and was now serving as the PM's home office. This is where we met him. Som Pal and I were ushered into his room almost immediately as the principal secretary to the PM was just leaving it.

As we sat, Som Pal happily informed the prime minister that he had spoken to me and that everything was all right. I was ready to be sworn in as MoS. I immediately contested his statement, and Singh realised that Som Pal was being economical with the truth, so he asked him to leave us alone to talk privately. 'I do not know the reason behind your decision to offer me the post of a minister of state,' I began, and proceeded to explain to him, without any rancour or bitterness, why I could not accept his offer.

In a nut shell, I told him that I had enjoyed his confidence as a functionary of the party; that I had done my best for it and discharged the responsibilities given to me to the best of my ability. I added that, though I was still loyal to Chandra Shekhar, I did not expect that to stand in the way of Singh being fair to his associates; and that all my colleagues in the party with whom I had worked closely

had been given cabinet status. Therefore, I expected to be treated equally.

Singh listened patiently before replying. 'Yashwantji, you have worked in the Government of India and know very well that there is little difference between a cabinet minister and a minister of state with independent charge. I am ready to make you a minister of state with independent charge.' He then took out a piece of paper from his pocket. 'I shall give you whichever ministry you want,' he continued, 'My secretary is waiting, and we can have the swearing-in ceremony today itself at 10 or 11 a.m.'

I must confess that I was tempted, but only momentarily. 'If there is no difference between a cabinet minister and a minister of state with independent charge, why don't you make me a cabinet minister and give me whichever portfolio *you* want?'

'I will make you a full cabinet minister after a few months,' VP Singh countered.

'I will wait for a few months to join your government then,' was my firm reply to that.

The conversation ended without reaching a conclusion. A huge crowd had already assembled outside to meet VP Singh. As I left with Som Pal in his car, I saw many familiar faces in the crowd, including that of my friend and MP, Dayanand Sahay. They were all there, as usual, to seek some favour or the other from the new prime minister of India. And here I was, I thought, summarily rejecting his overture to me.

Who was I, after all, but a former IAS officer who had quit the service only about five years ago at the level of joint secretary? And here I was, being offered a very important ministerial job in the Government of India and, perhaps foolishly, turning it down. I have mulled the question several times over since then and, each time, that wretched 'inner voice' that I have listened to so often, has assured me that I made the right choice all those years ago.

The Circle of Life

My refusal to become a minister of state seemed to have effectively raised my political stature. In the Budget Session of 1990, I was selected by the party to move

the Motion of Thanks to the President for his address to the joint session of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha. I also participated in major debates on behalf of the party. In April 1990, a special session of the UN General Assembly was held in New York. IK Gujral, the then foreign minister, was leading the Indian delegation. I was also included as a member and welcomed the opportunity to get away from the politics of Delhi for at least a couple of weeks.

The timing was also great as I had been planning to visit the US to see my new-born grandchild—Jayant and Punita's son, Rishabh. My wife was already in the US helping my daughter-in-law Punita, who was still a student pursuing her doctorate at Wharton in Philadelphia.

I left a week early to first go to Philadelphia and was delighted to see my grandson. After spending a couple of days there, we left for Washington, where our son-in-law Ashok Kantha was posted as a first secretary at the Indian Embassy. I stayed there for a few more days and returned over the weekend to New York to attend the special session.

At the time, I was completely unaware of the impending tragedy that awaited me, involving my dear old friend Ramaswamy Mani. Mani had been very ill with cancer of the lymph nodes. I was first informed about it by Sheila Dikshit, wife of another dear batchmate Vinod Dikshit. Sheila was minister of state in the PMO in the Rajiv Gandhi government. On learning about his illness, I had telephoned Mani in New York and assured him that all would be well, encouraging him to face the situation with fortitude. When I reached the US a few months later, I telephoned him but there was no response.

So, I called him again on reaching New York. This time, his wife Lakshmi answered the phone. 'He is very ill, Yashwant. He has been admitted to the intensive care unit of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Hospital,' she informed me sadly. When I expressed my wish to visit the hospital to see him, she informed me that no visitors were allowed there and even his immediate family members had to wait in the general waiting room of the hospital. I told her I would be busy the following day but that I would call her again the day after that.

When I contacted her again, a day later as promised, I was shocked beyond words when she told me in a trembling voice that Mani had already passed away, the very same day I had last spoken to her. His cremation had also taken place the same day. I felt extremely distraught and immediately rushed to her place. Mani's two children, a daughter and a son, and his elder brother who lived in the US, were also present in the apartment. I complained to Lakshmi that she should have informed me of Mani's death, so that I could have at least attended his funeral and said my final goodbye at least. Chance had brought me to New York at the time of his funeral, but fate had prevented me from bidding him adieu. The thought made

me miserable.

I had lost one of my closest and oldest friends. Mani was only 52 when he died. For me, nothing was more tragic than the loss of a friend I had known since we were at college together, often as rivals but always as best friends.

The birth of my first grandchild and the death of Mani showed me how the circle of life moves us all. At the same time, a call from Som Pal soon after proved to me how other things never change. He telephoned me while I was still in the US to ask me to return to India and be sworn in as a minister. When I asked him whether VP Singh had had a change of heart and was now ready to make me a cabinet minister, his reply was in the negative. I rejected the offer out of hand.

Life resumed its normal course after my return to India and though I was not a part of it, those in government showed me due courtesy, often seeking me out on various occasions. One day, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed asked me to accompany him on a trip to Bhatinda in Punjab. He had gone there to speak at a public meeting, which I was also invited to address. On another occasion, VP Singh asked me to accompany him on a day's trip to Bhopal and Jaipur. I accepted the offer and travelled with him in the prime minister's special aircraft. I was amazed to see the response he received from the crowd at both places. Clearly his popularity was at its peak and I returned suitably impressed.

However, managing the coalition of the Left and the Right, with the Janata Dal in the middle, was a perilous task. Both the Left parties and the BJP wanted their pound of flesh when it came to important appointments, for example. BJP was beginning to raise the Ram Mandir issue again. Within the Janata Dal, things had not been quiet either. Chandra Shekhar was already a declared dissident, as was I. He was working on Devi Lal, once again, to wean him away from VP Singh. Differences had also arisen regarding the elevation of Om Prakash Chautala as the chief minister of Haryana. As the industry minister, Ajit Singh had come out with a new industrial policy statement, one that I roundly criticised at a meeting of the parliamentary party.

Disagreements were often the order of the day.

Up in Flames

It was amidst all this, and sensing the trouble brewing within and outside the party, that VP Singh dropped a bomb by announcing the implementation of the Mandal Commission's December 1980 recommendations. This gave 27 per cent reservations to the other backward classes (OBCs) in government jobs and public universities – over and above those that were already in place for the Schedule Castes (SCs) / Schedule Tribes (STs).

The announcement came as a complete surprise to all of us.

The reservations issue also divided the country like never before. I had been personally involved in the implementation of the reservations for backward classes in Bihar, under Karpoori Thakur, but even politically-sensitive and caste-conscious Bihar had not responded the way India did to Singh's move. Upper caste students all over the country unitedly rose against the announcement.

Maurice Nagar Chowk in the Delhi University campus became famous overnight because Rajeev Goswami, a student of Deshbandhu College in DU, immolated himself there. He instantly became the face of the anti-Mandal agitation, one of the biggest post-Independence student movements in India, rivalling the JP movement of the 1970s.

All of us belonging to the Janata Dal were put on the defensive by the upper castes in indian society.

I wrote an article in the *Hindustan Times* where I suggested that perhaps reservations could be implemented in reverse—by reserving 15-20 per cent jobs for the upper castes and, thus, automatically reserving the balance 80-85 per cent for the backward castes and others. Because of my opposition to VP Singh, it was generally assumed that I was against this move as well. I must admit, I was not against reservations *per se* but was certainly against using the issue as a political tool. I also did not like the way that the VP Singh government was trying to implement the idea.

It was at the height of the anti-reservation Mandal protests that IIT-Delhi invited me for a debate on the issue, along with Mani Shankar Aiyar of the Congress party. As a member of the Janata Dal, I was expected to support the government while Mani was clearly opposed to it. The auditorium was packed to capacity with students. The moment I entered, I could sense the crowd's hostility towards me while Mani was warmly welcomed.

He spoke first and was loudly cheered by the assembled audience, even receiving a standing ovation at the end. There was a palpable chill in the auditorium as I took the floor, but I had marshalled my facts well and was able to reply to the points made by Mani. Slowly but surely, I was able to turn the mood of at least some in the hall.

Another experience, a few days later, was not so pleasant.

I was invited by some students to Maurice Nagar Chowk on campus to address students who gathered there regularly every evening. I accepted the invitation. Quite foolishly, in hindsight, I might add. A small group—including Anant Prasad Jaiswal, a Janata Dal member of Rajya Sabha and a close confidant of Chandra Shekhar, and US Jha, a trade union leader of the Railway Protection Force—accompanied me as I drove to the venue. On reaching Maurice Nagar Chowk, we found no trace of our hosts. The students who had already gathered there recognised me and surrounded our vehicle. They appeared openly hostile and menacing. We came out of the car and tried to reason with them, but they were in no mood to listen.

Soon, I found myself separated from my companions. The crowd started pushing and shoving me roughly. Someone even poured black ink on my white kurta, while others tried to hit me. I felt like a hunted animal. Not knowing their intentions, I found myself completely helpless, with no idea about how to extricate myself from the crowd. Luckily for me, some professors of the university, who were present at the scene, intervened and asked the students to let me go. The students finally stopped jostling me around but made me stand on the footpath, demanding my immediate resignation from both the Rajya Sabha and the Janata Dal. Then they asked me to respond to their demands.

Fortunately, I had not yet lost my nerve. On being given the chance, I addressed them as confidently as I could. I told them I was at their mercy. They had already humiliated me and could even kill me, I said, adding that I would not like to avoid making any commitment under duress from which I would be free to resile the moment I was allowed to safely leave the spot. I also informed them that I had not come on my own but had been invited by some of them who, unfortunately, were not around. I suppose I spoke convincingly, because the students allowed me to leave in peace after my little speech.

What may also have won their confidence was that when a few policemen on duty, who had noticed the commotion, came to enquire whether everything was alright, I replied that all was fine, and no intervention was required. I heaved a sigh of relief after the students released me. I found my car that was fortunately, undamaged, located my friends and was able to leave peacefully.

That evening remains one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life. Especially because I was proud to have stood my ground with dignity in an emotional, highly-charged atmosphere.

His acceptance of the Mandal Commission recommendations made VP Singh a messiah of the backward castes, even as he came to be reviled by the upper castes. The BJP, unhappy with his politics, sniffed an opportunity to confront him on the issue of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. Advani even decided to undertake a rath

yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya in support of the Ram temple.

In an uncanny way, all these problems continue to bedevil our polity. Perhaps our politicians have a vested interest in keeping them alive for their electoral gains. After all, politics thrives on exploiting the societal divides rather than eliminating them. Casteism, communalism, regionalism and language are still potent instruments in the hands of politicians, to be leveraged as and when deemed fit.

By the second half of 1990, India was in turmoil. Caste and communal passions were at their peak. With this as the backdrop, the fissures within the Janata Dal had also become more glaring. Chandra Shekhar's followers in the Janata Dal, with me playing a leading role, decided it was time to challenge Singh within the party.

In a meeting of the Janata Dal parliamentary party held on 30 September 1990 in the Parliament House Annexe, I decided to move a vote of no confidence against VP Singh. Predictably, an argument ensued. Madhu Dandawate argued that there was no provision in the constitution of the parliamentary party for a vote of no confidence. There could only be a vote of confidence. I argued that, just as in Parliament, a vote of confidence automatically created the right for a vote of no confidence. The same principle would then apply in the parliamentary party as well. I received some support from a few followers of Chandra Shekhar but very little support from the other members. I was clearly in a small minority.

Therefore, when my suggestion was overruled, I decided to stage a walkout from the meeting. A few of my friends also followed me, including Harmohan Dhawan who was sitting on the dais as secretary of the parliamentary party. I briefed the one or two media persons who were waiting outside. Even though I was not allowed to move the vote of no confidence against VP Singh, the battle against him had finally come out in the open. The Rubicon had been crossed, and there was no question of turning back.

The fight against Singh was not going to be an easy one. Though his popularity had declined, he was still the hero of a large majority of people. He was also the prime minister of the country, after all. However, this did not deter me, and I started working systematically to share my point of view, especially amongst the MPs. Our aim was to secure the support of at least one-third of the MPs, if it came down to splitting the party.

Under the anti-defection law prevailing at the time, support of one-third of a political party's members in a legislature was sufficient to split a party and avoid

attracting the punitive sanctions of the law. We identified the MPs who were likely to come over to our side and assigned hard-core Chandra Shekhar supporters the task of approaching each of them personally. It involved a lot of arduous work and some heartbreaks along the way, but we carried on undeterred.

At one point, I thought we had reached the magic figure. I even invited the media to my place on Feroze Shah Road so that I could parade the MPs before it. However, at the very last moment, some of the MPs deserted us and we could not muster the required number. In any case, we felt that facing the media would be a better option than calling off the press conference, so when the media turned up we told them that ours was a fight of principles and not so much of numbers. Thus, we added, we were not worried about our numerical strength and would carry on undeterred. Our perseverance paid off and we did succeed in securing the support of more than one-third of the MPs, ultimately, obtaining their signatures on a piece of paper expressing 'no confidence' in VP Singh.

However, before we could make our move, the ruling clique decided to launch a pre-emptive strike when they realised that we were close to achieving our objective. A letter was sent to the Speaker of Lok Sabha and the Chairman of Rajya Sabha demanding our expulsion from the party for anti-party activities. The Speaker immediately obliged, and the dissenting members were expelled from the party.

We soon organised a convention of all disgruntled party workers and office bearers, not only to show our support base in the states but also to obtain their signatures so that we could approach the Election Commission to recognise us as a separate party.

This is how the Samajwadi Janata Party was born, on 5 November 1990.

Meanwhile, Advani's rath yatra was drawing huge support from the people. All attempts at reconciliation with the BJP failed and Advani was finally arrested in Bihar, where Lalu Prasad Yadav was the chief minister. It was the last straw on the proverbial camel's back and the BJP formally withdrew support from VP Singh's government. Reduced to a minority, VP Singh had no option but to resign as prime minister.

The Janata Dal experiment had failed yet again, just like the Janata Party before it in 1979. Like Morarji Desai then, VP Singh had also proved to be inflexible and was often biased in his approach to issues. Political parties are voluntary organisations. Ideology, commitment and enlightened self-interest attract people to a political party. Rarely is everyone in complete agreement with the party on all issues, all the time. Differences within the party are but natural. Under these circumstances, one looks for a party where differences are minimal, and the scope for agreement is larger.

In a democratic society, therefore, political parties must work on the basis of consensus. When different parties and other disparate elements merge to form a new political party, a consensual approach becomes even more important. This is what we had tried to establish in the Janata Dal when, in the meeting at RK Hegde's place, we had decided to form an informal group consisting of Arun Nehru, Sharad Yadav, Ajit Singh, Hegde and I—the G-5, mentioned earlier. The party functioned smoothly under this arrangement and even the most contentious issues were easily resolved.

This consensual approach was destroyed the day a conspiracy was hatched in Orissa Bhawan to short-change Chandra Shekhar on the issue of prime ministership. Heavens would not have fallen had Chandra Shekhar been informed firmly and frankly that VP Singh would be the leader of the Janata Dal parliamentary party and, thus, its prime ministerial candidate. There was nothing Chandra Shekhar could have done to thwart a collective decision, given the confidence VP Singh enjoyed amongst the newly-elected MPs. He would have lost miserably had he decided to contest against Singh himself under the circumstances. His nominee would have fared far worse.

Even this damage could have been repaired had VP Singh adopted a more gracious approach after he was elected the leader of the parliamentary party that day in the Central Hall. He should have visited Chandra Shekhar and tried to make amends with him, which he failed to do. Further, his decision to make me only a minister of state was additional humiliation heaped upon Chandra Shekhar and his camp. Yet, despite all these mistakes, Janata Dal could still have survived had VP Singh followed my advice. I can vividly recall the day I received a call from him inviting me for a one-on-one meeting. His government had already been in place for a few months, and our relationship had become severely strained by then.

Immediately after receiving his call, I had gone to seek Chandra Shekhar's advice in the matter. He told me that dialogue was the soul of democracy, and if Singh wanted to meet me I should have no hesitation in doing so. Following that, I visited Singh and we had a long heart-to-heart conversation, where Singh confessed that his problem was that he was shy by nature and not a good communicator. He added that this was why he was often misunderstood, despite his best intentions. He felt that the misunderstanding with Chandra Shekhar could have been a result of this aspect of his character.

For my part, I offered to act as an intermediary between him and Chandra Shekhar. I also told Singh that Chandra Shekhar was an equally sensitive person and that I was sure he would respond if Singh made the first move. I had further suggested that he could use the services of a person like Chandra Shekhar, who was outside the government, to help resolve issues like militancy in Punjab, the

Babri Masjid/Ram Mandir issue and the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. Chandra Shekhar could have acted informally, outside the rigid framework of the government, and may even have succeeded where others had failed.

VP Singh had responded to this by saying that it was a brilliant idea and had enquired whether Chandra Shekhar was in town as he wanted to connect with him immediately. I then told him that he had gone to Ballia and would be back after a couple of days. When I met Chandra Shekhar after his return to Delhi, I enquired whether Singh had got in touch with him. Chandra Shekhar replied in the negative. Neither then, nor in the future did VP Singh act on the idea that he had lauded as a brilliant one.

Singh tried to mollify me, once again, by personally offering me the post of governor of Punjab. Militancy in Punjab was at its peak at the time. The state was under president's rule. One day, VP Singh asked me to see him. When I met him, he told me, 'Yashwantji, I want you to go to Punjab as governor. You are fully aware of the situation there. We need someone in Punjab who understands both administration and politics and there is no better person in my view who combines both these experiences than you.'

I promised to get back to him and went straight to Chandra Shekhar to seek his guidance in the matter. When I told him about the offer, he looked me straight in the eye and said in Bhojpuri, *'Governare bane ke rahe ta IAS ke naukari kahe chhorla?* ('If you wanted to be a governor, then why did you leave the IAS?') That one sentence settled the matter for me. I met Singh and expressed my inability to take up his offer.

After he became PM, VP Singh had resigned as president of the party. SR Bommai, a former chief minister of Karnataka had succeeded him. Bommai offered me the post of secretary general of the party, since Ajit Singh had become a minister in the government and could not hold both posts. Once again, I went to Chandra Shekhar for advice. Chandra Shekhar told me not to accept the post and I declined. Obviously, he was not very happy at Bommai's elevation.

A more interesting situation arose when the Janata Dal secured enough number of seats in Bihar to form the government. Arun Nehru and Ajit Singh, representing two important factions of the Janata Dal, told me that they would prefer me as chief minister of Bihar. Chiman Bhai Patel was also of the same view. I told him, 'Chiman Bhai, you know I would do so only if I receive the blessings of Chandra Shekhar. Why do you not persuade him to accept this proposal?' Chiman Bhai left my place immediately for Bhondsi. After a few hours, he returned, only to tell me that Chandra Shekhar had turned down the suggestion; he was not in favour of my going to Bihar as chief minister.

Chandra Shekhar probably felt that I was not well-equipped to handle the rough

and tumble of politics at the state level, that the MLAs and other local leaders would make my life difficult and that I may not be able to cope with the situation. He did not want me to fail and seemed to have decided that working at the central level was the best bet for me, at least at that point in time. I never questioned his judgement, assured that he only had my best interests in mind.

The general point I am making by mentioning these episodes is to emphasise that, during the ten-month tenure of VP Singh as prime minister, several opportunities presented themselves which, if properly utilised, could have repaired the fissures within the party and perhaps extended the life of the government. However, we wasted them all.

The Congress Party was watching the internal developments in the Janata Dal very closely. Chandra Shekhar was already in touch with Rajiv Gandhi. On his advice, I was also in touch with some of the Congress leaders. Our success in causing a split in the Janata Dal was, at best, doubtful until we came close to it. Even Chandra Shekhar was not fully convinced that we would succeed. However, a few of his dedicated followers in Parliament like Harmohan Dhawan, Digvijay Singh and Kamal Morarka, and others like Ravindra Manchanda outside it, were determined to make it happen. Dayanand Sahay, not a formal member of Janata Dal, was also working closely with us.

It is surprising how so few of us could come together and change the sultanate in Delhi. There is no doubt that we achieved critical mass only after Devi Lal finally turned against VP Singh and extended his support to us. I must add here that while we did promise ministerships in our government to some of the MPs, in case it was formed, there was never any monetary exchange for a change in loyalty.

After VP Singh's resignation, the Congress party offered its support to the breakaway faction of the Janata Dal led by Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lal. Chandra Shekhar staked his claim to form the government before the President of India, R. Venkataraman.[3] The next few days were spent in eager anticipation. The MPs who were supporting us had to be watched carefully and kept engaged so that the other group could not win them back.

We organised various lunches and dinners for them every day, to keep our flock together. I remember one such dinner hosted by Chiman Bhai Patel in Gujarat Bhawan, during which a rumour spread like wild fire that the President had invited Chandra Shekhar to form the government. The news turned out to be a hoax. Such

was the tension in those tumultuous times.

The President of India did finally invite Chandra Shekhar to form the government. Chandra Shekhar took the oath of office as the eighth[4] prime minister of India in the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhawan on 10 November 1990, less than a year after VP Singh had been sworn in. Devi Lal was also sworn in the same day as the deputy PM.

I had an interesting and instructive experience around this time. Chandra Shekhar had told me that he did not like the security paraphernalia that had been provided to him by the Special Protection Group (SPG). He asked me to talk to the SPG officers to reduce his security to the minimum. A day or two later, he called on Atal Bihari Vajpayee at his residence on Raisina Road. The roads were blocked for him. I happened to be driving that way. When I reached the Red Cross Road and Raisina Road roundabout, I was stopped by the traffic police. When I asked the constable on duty the reason for this, he told me that the prime minister was expected to pass that way.

Later, when I met Chandra Shekhar, I informed him that his travels within Delhi were indeed causing a lot of inconvenience, giving the example of my own first-hand experience. Chandra Shekhar's reply was surprising. 'These arrangements are best left to those who are in charge. They must make adequate arrangements for the prime minister's security. We should trust their judgement.' After this, I never discussed the issue of scaling down his security with the SPG again, even though he had initially asked me to do so! Such are the vagaries of power.

We had a limited number of MPs in Parliament, only 60, but each one wanted to become a minister. Chandra Shekhar had a difficult task on his hands. Negotiations were held with Devi Lal, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Chiman Bhai Patel and others to decide on a reasonable quota for their followers. The allocation of specific portfolios also posed a problem. Subramaniam Swamy was keen to become the finance minister. Many, including Chandra Shekhar himself, were reluctant to hand over the finance portfolio to him.

My first choice was the external affairs ministry. And thereby hangs a tale.

I had studied world history, international law, international relations and diplomacy during my university days. Therefore, I had always been attracted to tracking world events and international relations and had been keen to join the foreign service. Also, as I have already mentioned, had Mani not selected the IFS as his first choice, I would have certainly done so. Given my twelfth rank in the IAS/IFS examination result, there was no doubt that I would have got the foreign service as a matter of right.

The fact that I had also persuaded my nephew Dilip to join the IFS years later,

as well as arranged my daughter Sharmila's marriage with an IFS officer, is eloquent proof that foreign affairs and the foreign service was always my first choice in civil services, even as I held a great fascination for the Army. The formation of the Chandra Shekhar government and my place in it offered an excellent opportunity, I thought, of realising my old dream.

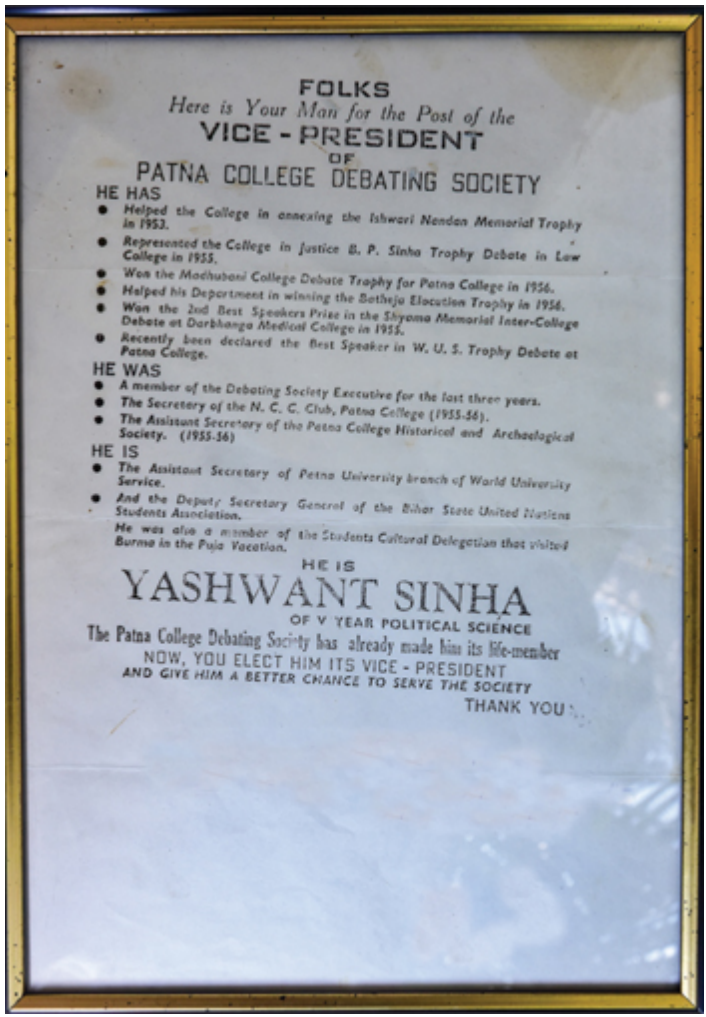
Alas, that was not to be.

Chandra Shekhar sent Kamal Morarka and Ravindra Manchanda to me, to persuade me to accept the post of finance minister, given the crisis the country was facing on the economic front. I accepted the offer, albeit reluctantly. VC Shukla, who had left VP Singh and joined Chandra Shekhar, was made the external affairs minister, and Subramanian Swamy was mollified by the allocation of two portfolios to him: commerce and law and justice. Harmohan Dhawan was given civil aviation and Kamal Morarka became a minister of state in the PMO, Digvijay Singh an MoS in the Ministry of Finance as well as in the MEA. Ravindra Manchanda was appointed as an officer on special duty (OSD) to the prime minister.

None of us had ever imagined that our struggle against VP Singh would ultimately lead to such an outcome. It was not an unwelcome development but certainly a surprising one. I took it all in my stride, as is my wont.

Yashwant Sinha as a kid, with his elder sister and brothers

YS as CPI(M) leader SA Dange during a mock parliamentary debate in college in 1957



FOLKS

Here is Your Man for the Post of the

VICE - PRESIDENT

OF

PATNA COLLEGE DEBATING SOCIETY

HE HAS

- *Helped the College in annexing the Ishwari Nandan Memorial Trophy in 1953.*
- *Represented the College in Justice B. P. Sinha Trophy Debate in Law College in 1955.*
- *Won the Madhubani College Debate Trophy for Patna College in 1956.*
- *Helped his Department in winning the Betheja Elocution Trophy in 1956.*
- *Won the 2nd Best Speakers Prize in the Shyama Memorial Inter-College Debate at Darbhanga Medical College in 1955.*
- *Recently been declared the Best Speaker in W. U. S. Trophy Debate at Patna College.*

HE WAS

- *A member of the Debating Society Executive for the last three years.*
- *The Secretary of the N. C. C. Club, Patna College (1955-56).*
- *The Assistant Secretary of the Patna College Historical and Archaeological Society. (1955-56)*

HE IS

- *The Assistant Secretary of Patna University branch of World University Service.*
- *And the Deputy Secretary General of the Bihar State United Nations Students Association.*

He was also a member of the Students Cultural Delegation that visited Burma in the Puja Vacation.

HE IS

YASHWANT SINHA

OF V YEAR POLITICAL SCIENCE

The Patna College Debating Society has already made him its life-member

NOW, YOU ELECT HIM ITS VICE - PRESIDENT

AND GIVE HIM A BETTER CHANCE TO SERVE THE SOCIETY

THANK YOU

Pamphlet in support of YS for the post of Vice President of Patna College Debating Society

YS and a friend—IAS batchmate Mani—with the cup won at an Inter-college Debating Competition

YS with college friends in Delhi

YS (number 7) in the Services Selection Board interview at Meerut in 1957 (between 13 and 17 January)

I.A.S. & I.F.S. EXAM. RESULTS

I. F. S. Results

Question In Rajya Sabha On Encyclopaedia Britannica Map

STATESMAN
11 FEB 1960

The much-awaited IAS exam result of YS

dian Nation

INDIAN POLICE SERVICE EXAMINATION RESULTS

SOFT COKE FAMINE AT DEHRI

THE INDIAN NATION
19 MAR 1960

IPS exam result of YS

YS (extreme left) singing a Bhojpuri song with IAS batch-mates at LBSNAA, Mussoorie (From right: HV Goswami, SK Lal, Ramaswamy Mani)

The bridegroom (Bhilai 1961)

YS with wife Nilima and her family

Babuji (1961)

Mai and Babuji

In front of the DC's bungalow in Dumka for a farewell photo with staff members, 1967

YS with wife Nilima and children in Bonn, Germany, 1972

Nilima, sons Jayant and Sumant with their friends in Bonn

YS with children in Berlin 1973 (The damaged Reichstag building can be seen in the background)

YS in front of the family tent at a camping site in the Black Forest, Germany

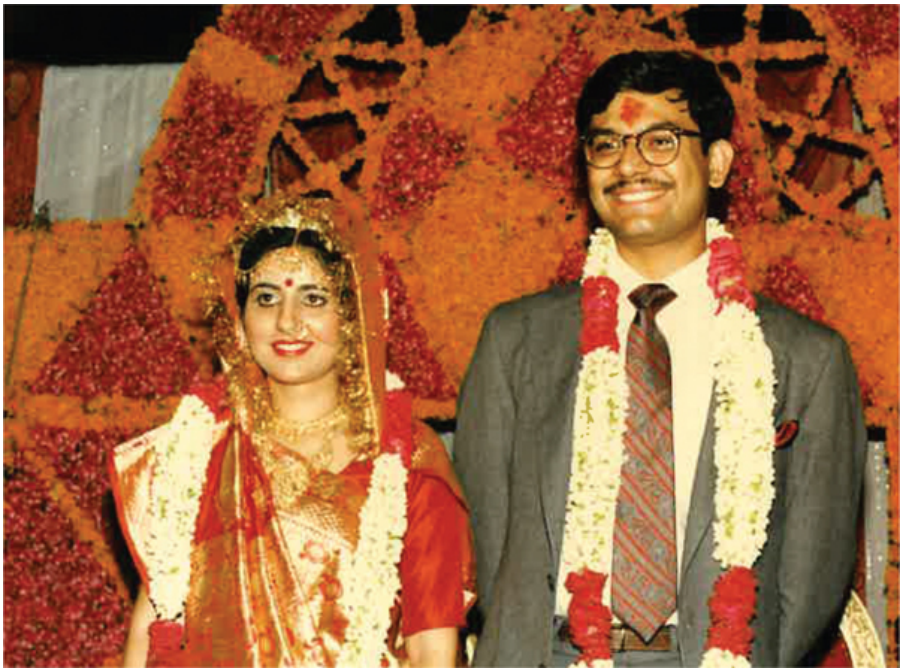
YS skiing in Austria

YS with Ambassador Kewal Singh, Mrs. Kewal Singh and Kanta Thakur (Director, ITDC), at a fashion show in Frankfurt, 1973

YS at a family gathering in Patna

YS with family members at Sharmila's wedding with Ashok Kantha in Patna in 1983

Daughter Sharmila with husband Ashok Kantha

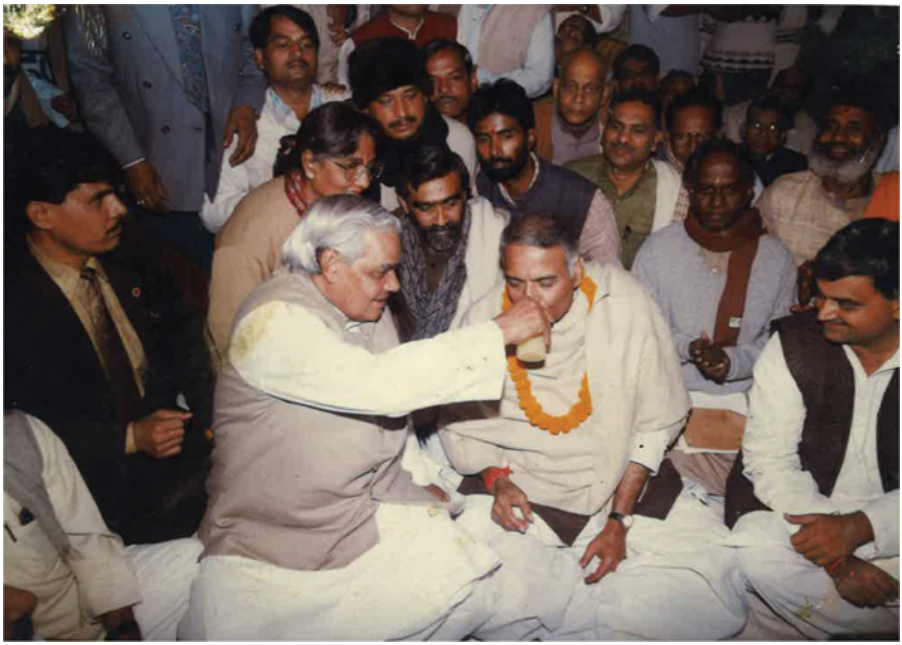


Jayant with wife Punita at their wedding

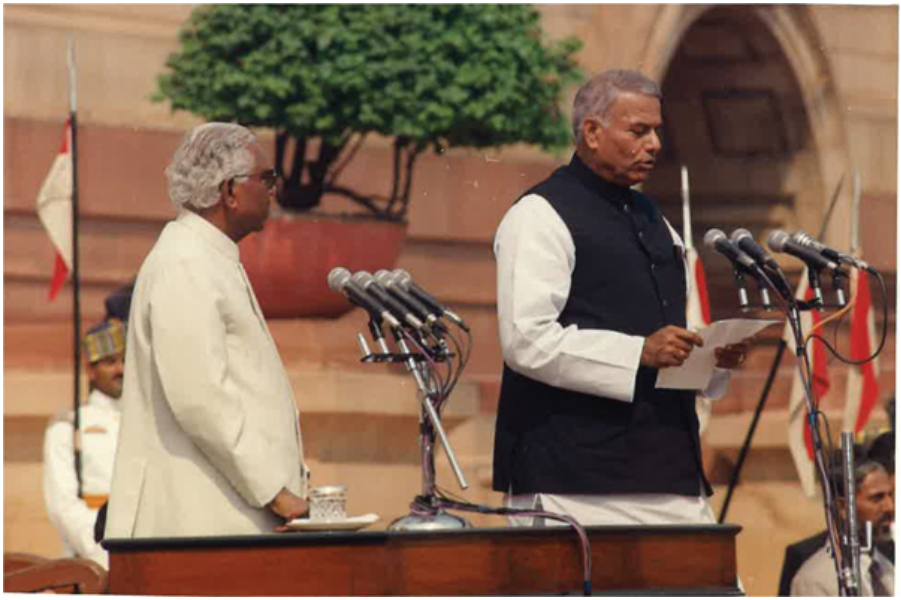
Sumant and Vaishali at their wedding

YS with Chandra Shekhar in December 1990

YS with family members in front of their cottage in Hazaribagh

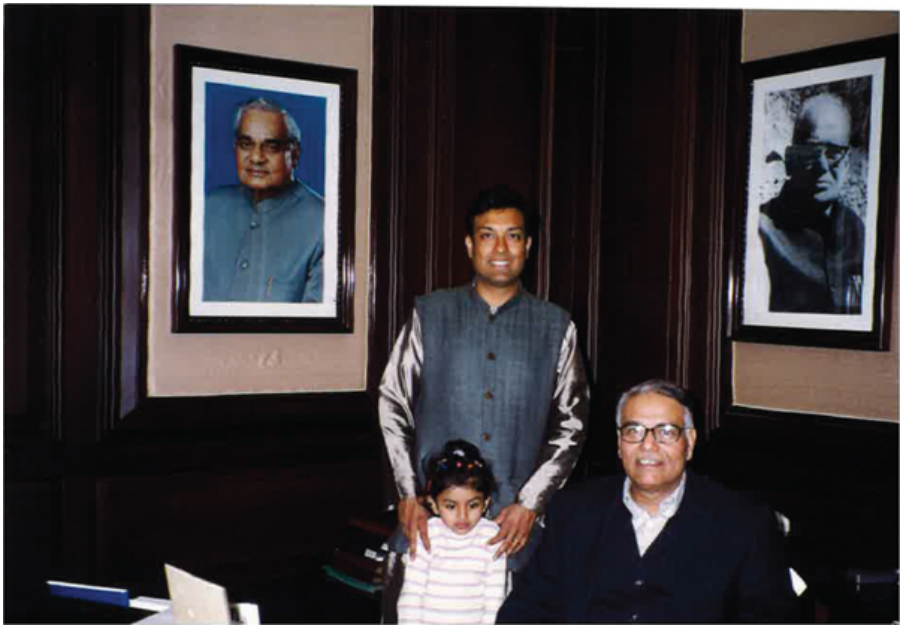


Prime Minister Vajpayee offering juice to YS to end his three-day protest fast in Patna after the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre in Bihar, 1997



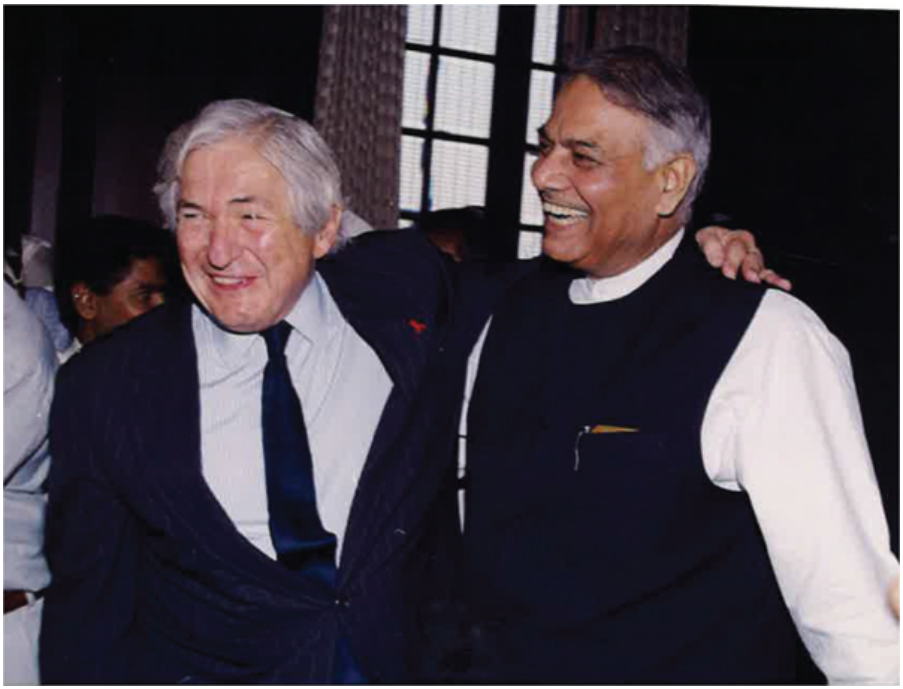
YS taking oath in 1998, with President KR Narayanan

YS with son Jayant and grandson Rishabh at FM's office



YS with son Sumant and granddaughter Tarushi at FM's office

YS in FM's office with Henry Kissinger



YS with Jim Wolfensohn, President, World Bank, in Delhi

YS with Murli Sinha and grandson Rishabh in the US

YS and LK Advani

YS and wife Nilima with Shatrugan Sinha, Shekhar Suman and Pahlaj Nihalani in Goa

YS with Prime Minister Vajpayee at his residence during Holi celebrations

YS with Prime Minister Vajpayee at his residence with Shatrughan Sinha and others during Holi celebrations

YS with Prime Minister Vajpayee at his residence along with others during Holi celebrations

YS with Bhairon Singh Shekhawat and others during a trip to Rajasthan

YS with Vice President Krishna Kant and Chandra Shekhar during the renaming of Hazaribagh Central Jail as Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Central Jail

YS with Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee during an inaugural function in Hazaribagh

All the FM's men : With his Budget team before the presentation of the Budget in 1998

Finishing touches: Budget 2002

YS with Jharkhand Chief Minister Babulal Marandi during inauguration of Pradhanmantri Gram Sadak Yojana in Hazaribagh in December 2000

YS with Vikhe Patil, Sumitra Mahajan and Maneka Gandhi

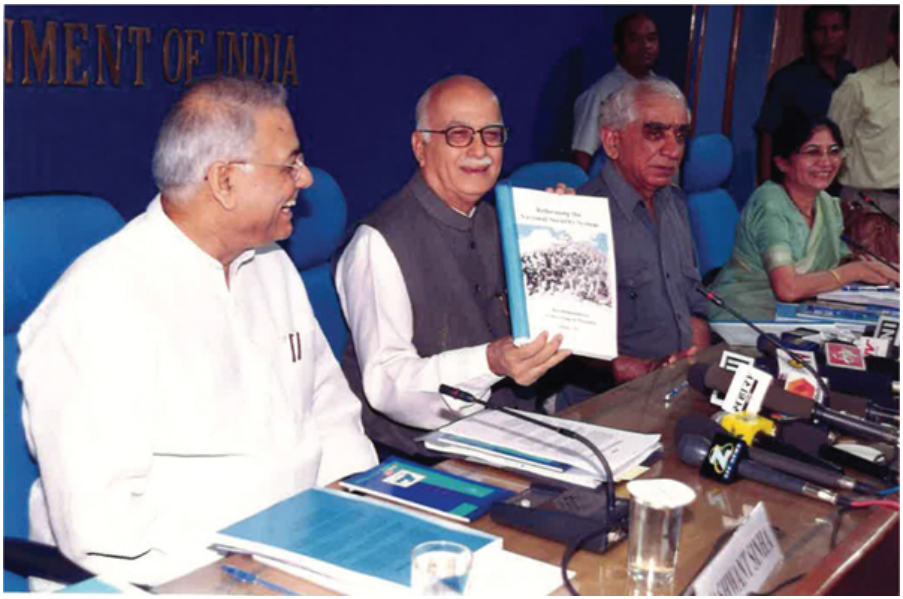
YS with Narendra Modi at a function in Gujarat

YS with Prime Minister GP Koirala of Nepal

YS with US President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Vajpayee at Delhi

YS with wife Nilima inaugurating a free computer training centre in Hazaribagh

YS with the finance ministers of Canada, US and the UK during a meeting of the IMF and World Bank in Canada



YS with LK Advani and Jaswant Singh during the release of the report of Group of Ministers on national security after the Kargil war

YS with Prime Minister Vajpayee, Pramod Mahajan, Murasoli Maran,Ranjan Bhattacharya and his wife Namita during a dinner in Lisbon,Portugal

YS and George Fernandes coming out of a Cabinet meeting

YS with family members in Delhi

YS with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow

YS with Prime Minister Primakov in Moscow (Nirupama Rao is also in the picture)

YS, Prime Minister Vajpayee and Brajesh Mishra enjoying a joke during a press conference abroad

YS with Pope Francis and Prime Minister Vajpayee at the Vatican

YS with US President George W Bush

YS with Chinese President Jiang Zemin

YS in Brasilia, with Celso Amorim and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, foriegn ministers of Brazil and South Africa, respectively, after concluding negotiations for

the formation of IBSA, 2003

Dr. Sinha receiving his doctorate from Patna University

YS with Bihar Chief Minister Raghubar Das, at home in Hazaribagh

YS with wife Nilima, son Sumant, AB Prasad and Mr. RK Khanna, President, AITA

YS with the king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck

YS with South African President Thabo Mbeki in Pretoria

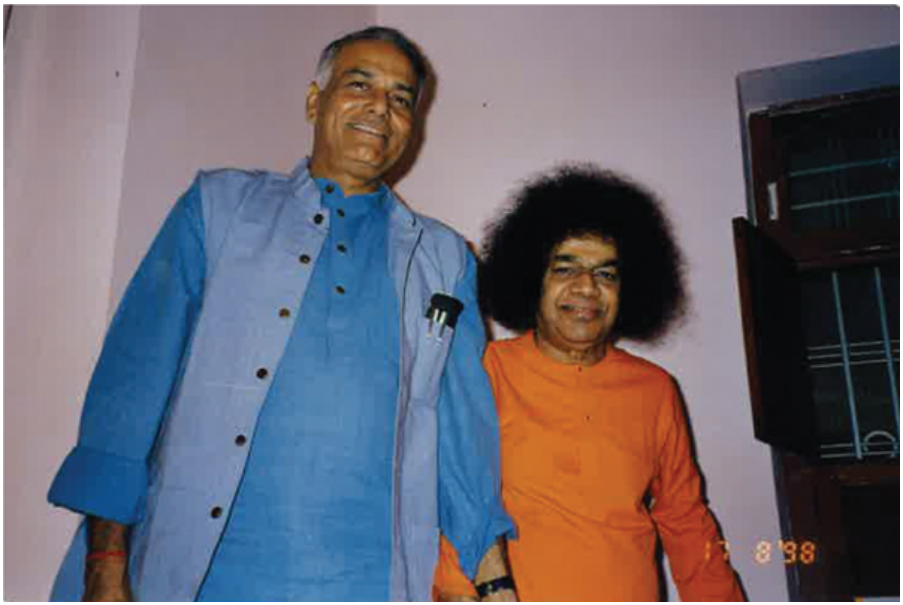
YS with US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington, DC

YS with the Russian Federation's Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov

YS with Brajesh Mishra and other members of the Indian delegation in China

YS with Prime Minister AB Vajpayee in Syria

YS with wife Nilima



Blessed: YS with Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi

YS with wife Nilima after victory in Lok Sabha elections in Hazaribagh

YS with IAS batchmates during Golden Jubilee reunion at LBSNAA, Mussooorie

YS with Nilima and grandchildren (from left to right) Siddhant, Tarushi, Devansh, Rishabh and Aashir

CHAPTER 18

A NEW INNINGS

The finance ministry was new for me. I had never worked in that ministry during my civil service career, having only attended a few scattered meetings here and there. I must also admit that I was only vaguely aware of the challenges facing the nation at the time and, thus, completely unprepared for what awaited me.

Chandra Shekhar had, no doubt, been briefed about the precarious balance of payments (BOP) situation that he had inherited. I am sure it took a lot of trust, on his part, to put me in charge of the ministry. Bimal Jalan, the then finance secretary, had already been relieved and was made a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (PMEAC) in January 1991. We had to look for a new finance secretary.

When I joined the ministry, the following officers were already in place—KP Geethakrishnan, a Tamil Nadu-cadre IAS officer from the 1958 batch, was secretary, expenditure; Pradip Lahiri, an IAS officer of the 1959 batch from the MP cadre was revenue secretary; and Deepak Nayyar, an economist of repute, was the chief economic advisor. Some other officer level changes had taken place immediately after the new government was formed. Montek Singh Ahluwalia moved out of the PMO and became commerce secretary, as desired by his minister Subramanian Swamy.

SP Shukla, a 1957-batch IAS officer of the Bihar cadre, the earlier commerce secretary, had to be posted elsewhere to accommodate Montek. Shukla was an extremely competent officer and had done a creditable job as India's representative to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and UNCTAD in Geneva. I knew him personally and admired him greatly. Thus, I was keen to have him as finance secretary. Chandra Shekhar agreed, and Shukla joined the ministry. It was largely with this team that I worked during my first stint as finance minister.

As a senior minister and as Chandra Shekhar's trusted man, I had to perform a couple of unpleasant duties soon after taking over as a minister in his government, like appointing a new cabinet secretary. There were two IAS officers of the 1956

batch who were in the running for the post: AN Verma and Naresh Chandra. Both were extremely competent and enjoyed formidable reputations.

Chandra Shekhar preferred Naresh Chandra for the post, so I suggested appointing Verma as his principal secretary. Since both belonged to the Kayastha community, and since caste considerations mattered a lot to politicians from UP and Bihar, Chandra Shekhar was reluctant to give the two most important posts to members of the same community.

He asked me to talk to AN Verma and explain the situation, which I did, offering him any other post that he wanted. The offer included the post of Ambassador of India to the European Community in Brussels that had earlier been occupied by KB Lall, no less. Verma flatly refused the offer and was extremely disappointed at being overlooked for the post of cabinet secretary. I always had the feeling that he held me personally responsible for not advancing his case. He was later appointed member secretary of the Planning Commission and, subsequently, as principal secretary to the PM under PV Narasimha Rao while Naresh Chandra continued as cabinet secretary. Obviously, Narasimha Rao did not suffer from caste sensitivity to the extent that Chandra Shekhar did.

Another unpleasant task assigned to me was to ask the then RBI Governor, RN Malhotra, to resign. The Congress Party, which regularly interfered with transfers and postings, was keen on bringing in Venkitaramanan, a former finance secretary under Rajiv Gandhi, as head of the RBI. Malhotra's term was far from over and the only way to accommodate the Congress party's wishes was to ask for his resignation. Once again, the unenviable task fell to me. I called Malhotra to Delhi for a meeting, apologised profusely and appealed to him to relinquish his post. Being the gentleman that he was, he obliged immediately and Venkitaramanan was soon appointed in his place.

My trials and travails in the finance ministry are recorded in some detail in my 2007 book *Confessions of a Swadeshi Reformer*.[5] I have no hesitation in saying that had I been pre-briefed about the prevailing economic situation in the country, which was already very precarious, I would have begged off from the finance portfolio. The crisis was much worse than I could ever have imagined and the few months that I spent in the finance ministry were days ruled by tension and worry.

During my short tenure, I travelled abroad a few times. The first was to Washington in April to attend the spring meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It was mostly to persuade friendly donor countries to expedite the release of their already-committed aid funds to India to help us get over the balance of payments (BOP) problem, which was precarious and deteriorating by the day. I achieved some success in my endeavour, with a few countries agreeing to disburse these funds early.

Chandra Shekhar had given me a personal letter for President George H.W. Bush. Not being familiar with the ways of Washington, I expected to get an appointment with the US President so that I could personally deliver it to him, but no such appointment was forthcoming. Our Ambassador in Washington, Abid Hussain informed me that a call on the US National Security Advisor (NSA) could perhaps be arranged so that I could deliver the letter to him. I was also told that the President could, depending on his mood, drop by for a photo op during the meeting.

Unimpressed by the offer, I decided not to visit the White House at all and suggested that Ambassador Abid Hussain get Chandra Shekhar's letter delivered through the normal channels instead. As often happens in cases like these, the story was leaked, and I was criticised for my stubbornness in a section of the media. I felt an odd sense of vindication years later when I travelled to Washington as the external affairs minister (EAM) of India and President George W. Bush, son of Bush Sr., invited me to meet him in the famous Oval Office.

The Washington trip was also memorable because my son-in-law Ashok Kantha was posted in the Embassy of India as a first secretary, and I spent all my free time with my daughter Sharmila and him. My IAS batchmate Jagannathan Murli was with the World Bank in Washington and I also remember spending an evening with him. My private secretary, Navin Kumar, an IAS officer of the Bihar cadre had accompanied me on this trip. Incidentally, I remember that I had asked him to buy me a comb when he went shopping. I still use it. It's an old habit; I do not easily discard things unless they are irreparably broken.

My next trip was to Japan—an important country for India that gave us a large amount of aid. A substantial chunk of our short-term debt, a real cause of concern for us, had been advanced to us by Japanese financial firms. I had an extremely busy schedule in Tokyo involving back-to-back meetings with representatives of these financial firms. The country's famous cherry trees were in full bloom, but I had neither the time nor the inclination to appreciate their natural beauty, given my mood and the reason for my visit. As always, rumours were spread even about my Japan visit, like the one about the country's finance minister Ryutaro Hashimoto refusing to meet me. That is not true.

Before leaving India, I had made sure that my meeting with him was arranged by the Embassy of India in Tokyo. It did indeed take place, but, regrettably it was very brief. We had barely exchanged pleasantries when he said that something urgent had come up unexpectedly, which he had to attend to in the Diet—the Japanese Parliament. This was not expected, but I hardly had a choice in the matter. The meeting continued with the permanent secretary of the ministry and other Japanese officials. Beggars cannot be choosers, as they say.

The epilogue of my brief encounter with Hashimoto was written seven years later. He went on to become the prime minister of Japan and had retired by 1998, by which time I was back leading the finance ministry. He was visiting India and I received a request from the Japanese Embassy that he wanted to call on me. I immediately fixed a time for our meeting in my North Block office. When we met, we hugged each other like long lost friends and had a pleasant chat.

When Chandra Shekhar had assumed office, the BOP situation of the country had been perilously close to disaster. Petroleum crude had become even more expensive and our foreign exchange reserves were depleting by the day. In the beginning of 1991, India's forex reserves, as a result of the First Gulf War, were down to a billion US dollars, barely sufficient for one or two weeks' imports.

We had been in touch with the IMF during VP Singh's time, and approached it for an emergency bailout. It agreed to release a sum of SDR[6] 1.4 billion under the Compensatory Financing Facility. The sum was small, but we felt it would perhaps be adequate until I presented my budget in March 1991. The idea was to go back to the IMF on the strength of a reformist budget and secure a regular loan from it to tide over the BOP crisis.

Alas, this was not to be, and the end of my misfortunes seemed nowhere in sight.

The Failure of Success

Meanwhile, the Congress Party was playing its own political game. It did not want to support Chandra Shekhar anymore. Perhaps they had expected that the Chandra Shekhar government would collapse under the weight of its own failures. Unfortunately for the Congress Party, our government started performing rather well on many fronts. While I was tackling the economic crisis and preparing a reformist budget, Chandra Shekhar was busy solving some of the other outstanding problems of the country. He had travelled to Maldives within weeks of taking over, for the 21-23 November 1990 meeting of the SAARC heads of government. He had built a good personal rapport with Nawaz Sharif who was serving his first term as the prime minister of Pakistan.

Years later, while leading a delegation of Indian parliamentarians to Pakistan, I met Nawaz Sharif, this time when he was the Leader of the Opposition in Pakistan. Sharif remembered meeting Chandra Shekhar in Maldives and had fond memories of him.

Apart from the long-standing tension with Pakistan, India was facing other serious problems at the time. One of them was the militancy in Punjab and the other was the Ram Mandir issue. Chandra Shekhar set out to resolve both. Because of the stand he had taken on the military action at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, he enjoyed the goodwill of the Sikhs. Om Prakash Chautala from our party was the chief minister of Haryana and enjoyed a close personal relationship with Parkash Singh Badal, the pre-eminent Akali Dal leader. This rapport also helped Chandra Shekhar to cool tempers in Punjab. He even went ahead and asked the Election Commission to hold the much-delayed elections in the state, which had been under President's Rule since May 1987. Elections were finally held in Punjab in February 1992.

On the Ram Mandir issue, he called both sides separately and informed them, sternly, that the government would maintain law and order at all costs, and violence would not be tolerated. He invited them to the negotiating table and constituted a committee of chief ministers, consisting of Mulayam Singh Yadav (UP), Sharad Pawar (Maharashtra) and Chiman Bhai Patel (Gujarat) to get both sides to negotiate and arrive at an amicable solution.

The committee worked well and even came close to a solution. It was this development that worried Rajiv Gandhi the most. Sharad Pawar told me later that he had shared the developments with Rajiv on a confidential basis even acknowledging that perhaps this had been a mistake and he should have avoided doing so.

If Chandra Shekhar had, indeed, resolved the Ram Mandir issue, controlled militancy in Punjab and improved India's relationship with Pakistan with its beneficial impact on the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, he would have truly become a 'man of destiny' for India. In addition, the budget I was about to present would have been a reformist one and would have changed the economic landscape of India.

In the end, the story of the Chandra Shekhar led government may well go down as one of missed opportunities amid endless possibilities. His biggest failure was that he started succeeding.

The Congress first decided to stall the presentation of a regular budget because it would have further enhanced the prestige of our government. They began spreading rumours about how I was preparing a very tough budget and began expressing their concerns regarding the same. When Chandra Shekhar heard this, he asked me to talk to the Congress Party. I happened to meet Rajiv Gandhi at an official function, where I told him that I would be happy to consider suggestions from the Congress, adding 'Who should I contact for this?' Rajiv Gandhi immediately suggested I speak to Pranab Mukherjee.

I invited Pranab Mukherjee home for lunch. We had a general discussion on the economic challenges facing the country and the overall approach I had in mind for the budget. Mukherjee was sympathetic, pleasant and extremely friendly. I was happy with the meeting but, obviously, Rajiv Gandhi was not. He decided to prevent me from presenting a regular budget. His suggestion that I should present only an interim budget, followed by a Vote on Account, was subsequently conveyed to Chandra Shekhar.

The news was a bolt from the blue for me, for I knew the consequences of not presenting a regular budget. I voiced my views frankly, almost bluntly, in a meeting of the Cabinet, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. It was decided that I should present an interim budget only. Saving the government was more important than saving the economy, I was told. In fact, I was most disappointed with Chandra Shekhar's attitude. He was the only other person in the government, apart from me, who fully understood the consequences of such an action and, yet, decided to accede the Congress party's highly unreasonable demand.

I was sorely disappointed by the overall attitude of the Congress. Here we were, facing the worst post-Independence economic crisis, largely created by the Congress itself, and all it could think of was politics and its own electoral prospects. Economics is a politician's last priority in India, as I realised then, and on many occasions later.

On my return home, I penned a hand-written resignation letter, requesting Chandra Shekhar to relieve me of my responsibilities. I stopped going to office, returned my official car and even stayed away from an *Iftaar* party that Chandra Shekhar hosted a couple of days later at his Race Course Road residence. He probably felt equally upset at my resignation, but it was only when I did not turn up for the *Iftaar* party that he realised the seriousness of my intentions and decided to deal with the matter directly. He sent his private secretary CB Gautam to my residence, who insisted that I accompany him to 7 RCR.

I acceded to his request and went to 7 RCR. When we met, Chandra Shekhar enquired about my health. Then he told me that my resignation would lead not only to the resignation of the entire government, but also affect the party's two state

governments in UP and Gujarat. He requested me to give him more time to settle matters. He then proceeded to tear up my resignation letter in front of me, quite dramatically I must add. I had no choice but to give in. I could never say 'no' to him.

The interim budget could only be a routine one, at best, but I still included some innovative ideas in it. Even the presentation of a routine, interim budget faced stiff opposition from the leaders of various parties in the Lok Sabha. For me, the situation was extremely disagreeable. But it seemed that a single sacrifice, however major, was not going to be enough to satisfy the Congress. It was, as I had suspected, determined to bring the government down on some pretext or the other. That is exactly what happened a few days later when the Congress accused the government of spying on Rajiv Gandhi by posting two Haryana constables outside his house. The party decided to absent itself from the Lok Sabha during voting on the Motion of Thanks to the President for his address to Parliament.

Clearly, its intention was to force Chandra Shekhar to resign. In fact, the evening before, in anticipation of the move, I had strongly pleaded with Chandra Shekhar not to give in to the Congress's pressure and resign with dignity instead. That is exactly what he did the following day in Lok Sabha. He replied to the debate on the Motion of Thanks on 6 March 1991 and, at the end of his speech, announced his resignation four months after he had taken office.

The ill-fated experiment of forming a government with the help of the Congress party had failed once again. Nobody expected a government with only 60 MPs in Lok Sabha to last for long. But the government was formed on the basis of a clear understanding that it would be allowed by the Congress party to last for at least one year. This was the understanding that was conveyed by it to President Venkatraman as well.

The unstated understanding was that the SJP would merge with the Congress party after a year and it would then become a Congress party government, which would complete its full term. Rajiv Gandhi perhaps felt that if Chandra Shekhar succeeded as prime minister, given the wily politician that he was, it would become difficult to replace him. This became the chief cause of his angst and he decided to nip the whole thing in the bud by withdrawing support, at what he may have considered the most opportune time.

It's politics, stupid!

This episode taught me two very important lessons. The first was that, in India, the economy is never central. Politics is. Always. Our politicians and leaders do not

care about economics, the fiscal health or the future of the country. For them politics itself is of supreme importance; it is political expediency that tends to dominate the discourse and nothing else. We narrowly escaped the economic crisis of 1991; the next time around, we might not be so lucky.

The second was about trusting the Congress party. Should Chandra Shekhar have put his faith in the Congress in the first place? The Congress had been responsible for the split in the Janata Party in 1979, given its encouragement to Choudhary Charan Singh to break away and form a government with Congress support. Predictably enough, it went on to withdraw that, which led to the fall of the government and fresh elections.

History repeated itself with Chandra Shekhar in 1991, with Deve Gowda in 1997, and with IK Gujral in 1998. The Congress played the same game with the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1999, by manipulating the AIADMK that time. Trust in politics is a rare commodity and the Congress party would have to improve its record if it wants to be trusted in future.

Years later, I remember, a meeting of the BJP's National Executive in Lucknow that I was unable to attend for personal reasons. An enterprising journalist from *The Asian Age* newspaper wrote a report that I was not in attendance because I was planning to quit the BJP and join the Congress. I called Seema Mustafa, who worked for the newspaper, and told her that I would rather commit suicide than join the Congress—a statement she promptly published the very next day.

Not only the government and I, personally, but the entire nation went through extremely harrowing times after the resignation of the Chandra Shekhar government. As part of the caretaker government, there was nothing much that I could do except plead with foreign lenders and foreign governments to help India in its time of need. This is what I had done during my visits to Washington and Tokyo.

Ultimately, we were forced to mortgage our gold reserves to get a few dollars so that there was still some foreign exchange left when the new government was sworn in. I could have done without mortgaging the gold, but that would have been highly irresponsible. As an Indian, I felt ashamed and humiliated, and vowed never to find myself in such a position ever again. My experiences from this period are fully chronicled in my 2007 book, *Confessions of a Swadeshi Reformer*.[7]

In the general elections that followed the fall of the Chandra Shekhar government,

my friends in the party and outside advised me to contest from Patna. Contesting against me were IK Gujral from the Janata Dal, CP Thakur from the Congress and Shailendra Nath Srivastava, the sitting MP from the BJP—the last being a close relative as well. Lalu Yadav was the CM of Bihar at that time. It was a closely contested election. I worked as hard as I could, but my party was clearly weak, and we lacked effective party cadres. Lalu Yadav's workers looted many booths, even in Patna town, to help Gujral.

At the end of the day, all candidates, barring Gujral, complained bitterly to the Election Commission against the high-handedness of the Janata Dal workers and the rigging of the election. TN Seshan, who was now the chief election commissioner, countermanded the election following our complaints of large-scale rigging. I remember Chandra Shekhar was transiting through Patna that evening after campaigning in Bihar, and both Lalu and I were at the airport to see him off. I made it plain to Lalu that I was not happy to see him. He mentioned this to Chandra Shekhar, arguing that I had no reason to be cross with him as I was set to lose the election anyway. 'It is hardly the justification for his rigging the election,' I remember telling Chandra Shekhar.

On my return to Delhi the following day, I was in for a great shock when I arrived at the airport. My driver informed me that Rajiv Gandhi had been assassinated, while campaigning for the elections. For a moment, I could not believe it. The news left me stunned. I was told that the plane that was flying Sonia Gandhi to Chennai, where the assassination had taken place, was about to take off from the technical area of Palam Airport.

The death of Rajiv shocked the entire world. Since only a part of the elections had taken place so far, it led to the postponement of the remainder by a few weeks. This only extended my personal agony of managing the Indian economy on a shoestring. The gold mortgage story had already broken, and, like Banquo's ghost, it shadowed me wherever I went for years to come. In fact, it still does.

The only saving grace, perhaps, was that I had managed to prevent India from defaulting on its external loan commitments during this difficult period. Had I not done so, India would have truly become a basket case. It would have been like a run on a bank and we would have taken much longer to recover. I was most relieved when PV Narasimha Rao was finally sworn in as the new PM, and Dr. Manmohan Singh, who had served as Chandra Shekhar's economic advisor, became the finance minister.

The Samajwadi Janata Party's performance in that general election was pathetic. We won only five seats in the Tenth Lok Sabha, one of which was Chandra Shekhar's from Ballia and another was HD Deve Gowda's from Hassan. VP Singh's Janata Dal got 59 seats. The Congress party was once again able to

form the government, albeit a minority one, having won only 232 seats. The BJP with 120 seats, formed the main Opposition.[8]

Clearly, I seemed to have reached a dead end in politics. The SJP had no future. Some serious introspection was bound to follow.

I continued as a member of Rajya Sabha as well as the leader of the party in the Upper House. As finance minister, I had moved to 4, Teen Murti Marg and it continued to be our residence. It was here that the wedding of our youngest child took place. Sumant had finished his studies at IIT Delhi, followed by an MBA from IIM Calcutta, after which he had joined the Tata Administrative Service (TAS). After a year or so there, he had gone to the US to study international and public affairs at Columbia University.

His soon-to-be father-inlaw, Om Prakash Nigam, who was also in government service, stayed at Satya Marg in Delhi. My parents-in-law knew the family and told us about their daughter, Vaishali, a student of Hindu College. The two youngsters were introduced to each other and though theirs was a traditional, arranged marriage, they got on well together. This time, we were able to duly celebrate the wedding with friends and relatives who gathered around us to bless the young couple. The newly-weds went back to the US soon after the wedding where Vaishali also joined Columbia University for further studies.

One day, sometime after, when I was out of Delhi, my wife received a phone call from Vasant Vihar informing her that her father was unwell. She rushed there only to learn that he had already been taken to the Ram Manohar Lohia hospital. She drove immediately to the hospital where she found her mother and brother arguing with the receptionist to allow her father to be taken to a doctor. The receptionist shook his head and refused to do so, even as my wife and her family begged and pleaded. Nilima had no choice but to inform him, at last, about her being the wife of an MP.

The situation changed at once. The man jumped to his feet and let the stretcher go in immediately. Sadly, her father had already passed away but, as late as it was, at least now the doctors were more sympathetic and polite to the family. His death was rather sudden and unanticipated, for my father-in-law had never complained about his health or mentioned that he was not feeling well. I lost a dear father figure who had always come to our aid and helped me, personally, with many of my problems. In fact, every time that I lost the post I had held and we had to vacate government accommodation, with no alternative before us, he had come to our rescue and offered us shelter at his Vasant Vihar home. For my wife, it left a void that was difficult to fill.

Back in Parliament, I continued to oppose the Narasimha Rao government on various issues. A stock market scam had broken out in 1992 involving many

brokers, including the infamous Harshad Mehta, as well as various bank officials. Under pressure from the Opposition, the government was forced to appoint a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) to enquire into it. Chandra Shekhar nominated me on the JPC from Rajya Sabha. He felt that since I was the immediate predecessor of Manmohan Singh, I should be there so that the shadow of the scam did not fall on our short tenure.

As a former finance minister, I was an important member of the committee. I performed my duties diligently and was available to dispel any doubts that may have been cast on my tenure. I must record my sense of appreciation for the chairman of that JPC, former Union minister and senior Congress leader, Ram Niwas Mirdha. Despite belonging to the ruling Congress party, he was fair in his dealings and conducted the proceedings with dignity and complete impartiality.

As for me, I also took special interest in cases that involved leading members of the government and their relatives/friends.

Under the Rajiv Gandhi government, Manohar J. Pherwani had been appointed as chairman of the Unit Trust of India (UTI), where he had indulged in various malpractices. The VP Singh government had got rid of him and, as finance minister, Madhu Dandavate had recorded an observation on the file that he should not be considered for any such appointment in future. When Chandra Shekhar became PM, the Congress started mounting pressure on him to re-appoint Pherwani as chairman of UTI. I resisted the move and did not allow it to happen. However, Pherwani was re-appointed when Narasimha Rao became prime minister.

So, when Manmohan Singh appeared before the JPC, a member asked him about the appointment of Pherwani. With a straight face, he replied that he had not appointed him but it was his predecessor who had done so. I was appalled to hear this and asked him, point blank, 'Do you mean to say that *I* had appointed him?' When he replied in the affirmative, I requested the chairman of the committee to call for the relevant file to verify his claim. The file was summoned, and I was proved right. Pherwani had indeed been appointed by Manmohan Singh. Chandra Shekhar had been right in his decision to make me a part of the JPC.

For reasons best known to him, Narasimha Rao was very keen for me to join the Congress party. It could also have been because, as a member of the JPC, I was actively pursuing the case against his son, among other things. I met him a few

times at the behest of friends in the Congress but there was no question of my joining the party. On my part, I only met Rao to oblige my friends in the Congress who wanted to take the credit for taking me to him. But it seems Rao had a larger plan in mind. At one of our meetings, he, told me that he knew something good was going to happen that day. He then informed me that he had approached some others in my party who were prepared to defect.

Since the number of defectors would be one-third of the total number of SJP members in Rajya Sabha, the anti-defection law would not be breached, he said, and our membership of the House would be completely safe. He even spoke to the then chairman of Rajya Sabha, Shankar Dayal Sharma, while I was there, and told him that everything had been settled. He added that I would be meeting him during the day to formally move on the matter. I realised then that things had gone too far, and the time had come for me to put an end to the ongoing drama. I told Rao that my mind was not yet fully made up and that I would not be able to meet Sharma that soon.

I never met Rao again on this issue nor did I go to meet Sharma. The matter was put to rest, as far as I was concerned. Since I did not defect, the others could not either and the party remained intact.

Chandra Shekhar was fully aware of these developments, but not even once did he raise the matter with me. Obviously, he conceded me the right to take care of my political future.

After declining the offer from the ruling Congress, the alternative before me was to either continue in the SJP and get nowhere, as things stood then, or join the BJP. A common friend, industrialist and former MP DN Patodia, had once invited LK Advani and me for a private lunch at his house. Clearly, his intention was for us to meet so that I could make up my mind about joining the BJP. Advani and I had had a pleasant meeting but neither of us raised the issue. The matter of me joining the party had been left unstated.

In the meantime, the various factions of the Janata Dal were also attempting a merger. Background talks led to a conference of all the splinter groups in Faridabad, because VP Singh had taken a vow not to enter Delhi, the reason for which now escapes me. Preliminary talks regarding the merger were held there, with everyone emphasising the need to come together. This was especially in view of the forthcoming assembly elections in states where the earlier BJP governments had been dismissed after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Every faction was asked to nominate two representatives each to work out the details of the merger. Chandra Shekhar nominated Om Prakash Chautala and me for the task.

Despite the presence of all the top leaders of the erstwhile Janata Dal, it was Lalu Yadav who called the shots in Faridabad. I had no doubt in my mind that I

would have to be completely at his mercy after joining the Janata Dal. I had heard stories of how he humiliated important leaders of his party at will, and wanted to avoid such a situation at any cost. I attended a few meetings of the group set up to work out the details of the merger but soon realised that nothing had changed as far as the mindset of some of my former colleagues was concerned. I was sorely disappointed by their attitude.

Thus, slowly but surely, I started drifting toward the BJP. One day I came across Lalu on a flight to Delhi where he refused to recognise me, let alone talk to me, even though we were sitting near each other during the journey. My mind was finally made up.

PART V

THE BJP

CHAPTER 19

JOINING THE BJP

I joined the BJP a day after Diwali in November 1993. Party president LK Advani held a press conference at the party office at 11, Ashoka Road to announce my induction. He described me as a 'Diwali gift' for the party, adding that I would become only the second person in the history of India, after Acharya Narendra Dev, to resign from Parliament after changing parties.

The only condition I had set before joining the BJP was that I be allowed to resign my Rajya Sabha seat immediately and announce it at the media interaction. Though I had a few months of my tenure left, I felt that, Anti-Defection Act or not, ethics demanded that I voluntarily resign from my seat even though the BJP MLAs had also voted for me in my election to the Rajya Sabha.

Strange as it may sound, I did not meet or talk to any other leader in the BJP about my joining the party. I met a few office-bearers of the party on the day I joined, but never felt the need to curry favour or seek anyone out. I also made no attempt to meet anyone at the state or local levels, except for Kailashpati Mishra whom I already knew personally.

Leaving Chandra Shekhar and his party was one of the most gut-wrenching and painful experiences of my life. I had started my political career with Chandra Shekhar, accepted him as my guru in politics and was completely loyal to him even under the most trying circumstances. Thus, it was very embarrassing for me to part company with him. I must admit that I did not have the courage to meet and tell him personally what I intended to do.

Instead, I wrote him a letter, sealed it in an envelope and sent it via RP Singh, a labour leader of Delhi who was personally close to me. I could not muster the courage to meet him after the event either, and did not see him for many months following my induction into the BJP. For some reason, however, every time I met Advani, he would ask me whether I had met or spoken to Chandra Shekhar yet, wanting to know his reaction to my joining the BJP only to have me reply that I had not, and I had no idea of the latter.

A few months later, I learnt that Chandra Shekhar and I were likely to be present at the same event in Delhi. Realising that it would be even more awkward to meet him at the function, I finally decided to call on him. He asked me to come to Bhondsi. There were a few moments of uncomfortable silence when we met, until he initiated the conversation and made me feel as comfortable as I could under the circumstances.

In a nutshell, what he told me was that I had enjoyed a degree of credibility in politics, which had been destroyed by my move of joining the BJP. He added that I would have to work very hard to regain the same. He also warned me that it would be impossible for me to rise to the top in the BJP since I did not have an RSS background, and that it was most likely that the party would use and discard me.

On my part, I reminded him of what I had said in a meeting of the SJP in Haridwar a few months earlier, while discussing the merger of JD and SJP. I had told the party, in clear terms, that I regarded the merger as a huge compromise, and that if such a compromise was key to securing our political future, then we should each be allowed to choose our individual compromises instead.

Chandra Shekhar was sad that we had parted company politically, as was I. So, I took a silent vow that day never to criticise or contradict him publicly, and to continue our close personal relationship. In the years that followed, there were occasions when he criticised me publicly, both in and out of Parliament, but I never took issue with him. In fact, I have always had good things to say about him, all of which he richly deserved.

Common friends would often ask Chandra Shekhar the reason for my leaving him for the BJP. On one such occasion, he explained it with the help of a story, saying 'One of my friends had fallen ill. When news of the illness reached me, I decided to pay him a visit in the hospital. Upon reaching there I was told that he had been admitted in the tuberculosis (TB) ward, which made me doubly worried. When I finally met him in the TB ward and asked him what the matter was, he assured me there was no need to worry. He only had a cough, cold and fever but since no other beds were available except in the TB ward, he was being kept there.'

Chandra Shekhar then likened this to exactly what had happened with me. According to him, I had found a bed in a TB ward for treatment of something ordinary like a cough and cold, only because no other bed was available!

It was Chandra Shekhar's greatness that he never allowed my defection from his camp to come in the way of his affection for me. Subsequent events would prove this beyond the shadow of a doubt.

But before I talk about my time with the BJP, I must digress to talk about the fateful events of December 1992.

6 December 1992

The Babri Masjid was demolished a year before I joined the BJP. In fact, my speech in the Rajya Sabha, two days after the event, has often been quoted to damn me after I joined the party.

6 December 1992. I remember the day very well. Deve Gowda's son was getting married on 5 December in Bangalore and Harmohan Dhawan's daughter was getting married in Chandigarh on the same day. Given his proximity to both, Chandra Shekhar could not miss either of the two weddings. Fortunately, the wedding in the south was during the day and the one in Chandigarh in the evening. Chandra Shekhar hired a private plane so that he could attend both functions, and the rest of us tagged along.

After attending the wedding in Bangalore, we reached Chandigarh before the evening, attended Dhawan's daughter's wedding, and stayed in the city overnight.

The following day turned out to be a fateful one.

We were preparing to leave Chandigarh for Delhi when, casually glancing at the news on TV channels, we suddenly saw the Babri Masjid being demolished by 'karsevaks' (religious volunteers) on live television. Once we realised the gravity of what was happening, Chandra Shekhar immediately rang up the prime minister. The PM was not available to talk, and we decided to return to Delhi at once.

All hell broke loose in the capital. The next day, the incident was strongly condemned in both Houses of Parliament, followed by a regular debate in Rajya Sabha. It was in this debate that I participated on behalf of the SJP.

Following the demolition, on 15 December 1992, the Narasimha Rao government dismissed the four state governments of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. Assembly elections in Rajasthan, MP and UP were in full swing when I joined the BJP in November 1993. Advani asked me to travel with him to UP, the day after I joined, where he was going to campaign for the assembly elections. I addressed large meetings with him in Varanasi, Allahabad and Lucknow during this trip. Everywhere we went, Advani introduced me to the audience in glowing terms. I even stayed back in UP and addressed many more meetings on my own.

With Advani's blessings, I got off to a promising start in the BJP. He made me

an invitee to the party's National Executive and would give me other special assignments from time to time. For instance, he asked me to prepare the draft of an appeal from the party's central leadership to the electorate of the four poll-bound states: UP, MP, Rajasthan and HP. I prepared the draft, which was taken up for discussion by the party's top leadership in a meeting at the party headquarters. Apart from Advani, some of the others present in the meeting were Atal Bihari Vajpayee, KR Malkani, KL Sharma and JP Mathur, to name a few.

In the draft there was no mention of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. The leaders present went through the draft, liked it, and were on the verge of approving it when Malkani mentioned, almost apologetically, the absence of any reference to the Mandir issue. I admitted that it had been an omission on my part. The BJP leaders felt that the media would most likely highlight the omission itself and perhaps ignore the rest of the statement. Advani asked me to mention it in the draft, which I did in a few sentences, and the issue was resolved.

My lack of an RSS background has often been brought up by 'friends' in the BJP. I have mentioned this incident only to emphasise that, because I didn't have it, many of the ideas that might have automatically occurred to a person with a Sangh background did not form a part of my mental make-up. The incident also highlights that, even a year after the event, BJP's leadership was still apologetic about the demolition.

Rajya Sabha elections were held in March 1994 and I made absolutely no effort to get the BJP nomination, even though it had the strength to elect one candidate from Bihar. The party's Bihar unit suggested the name of Janardan Yadav and the central election committee of the BJP approved it. Yadav was subsequently elected to the Rajya Sabha.

Lalmuni Choubey, who was the leader of the legislature party in Bihar at the time, told me years later about what had transpired that day. Apparently, when the Bihar team appeared before the central election committee in Delhi, Advani asked them about me, only to be informed that nobody at the state level had even mentioned my name. Snacks were just being brought into the room. Normally, according to Choubey, Advani would have asked the team to stay back and partake of the refreshments but he was so disappointed with their reply that he did not even show them this courtesy. Once again, it showed the affection Advani had for me.

In June 1994, a meeting of the National Executive and National Council of the BJP was held at Vadodara. There was a very healthy tradition in the party in those days for all the top leaders and members of the National Executive present in Delhi to meet in the party president's room every morning at 11 a.m. At one such meeting, Advani suggested that I prepare the draft of the economic resolution of the party for the Vadodara meet. To me, it seemed like a casual mention but when I

asked Sushma Swaraj, who was also present, she advised me to take Advani's 'suggestion' as a command and duly prepare the draft.

Over the next few days, I did exactly that, even though nobody in the party showed any interest in seeing or even discussing it before leaving for Vadodara. Many of us, including Advani and his wife Kamlaji, travelled by train to Vadodara, which was the preferred mode of travel back then. Even Chandra Shekhar used to travel by train. Travelling by commercial flights was the exception rather than the rule and travelling by private planes was rare. How things have changed!

It was an overnight train journey to Vadodara. But it was only the following morning, during the journey, that Advani casually asked me about the draft of the economic resolution. He was pleased upon reading it and asked me to move the resolution in the National Executive meeting and, subsequently, in the National Council meeting. I was told this was a great honour that had been conferred upon me by Advani, especially since I had joined the party only a few months ago.

Interestingly, it was in this very resolution that I had suggested the abolition of the Planning Commission and explained the reasons for the same. At that time, the suggestion was discussed and discarded as being too drastic. It would be another two decades before the Planning Commission would finally be relegated to history, but in a manner that remains questionable.

It was after this presentation that I emerged as the preferred spokesperson of the BJP on economic issues.

My acceptability in the BJP was not a foregone conclusion. While Advani and others at the central level welcomed me warmly, I cannot say the same about the state level in Bihar. Kailashpati Mishra was warm but the others were casual, even distant. My worst experience, of course, was at the district level where KP Sharma, the district president, was clearly unfriendly. At a public meeting in Hazaribagh to welcome me into the party, which was held on a street corner, he told the audience that he did not know the reasons for my joining the BJP and that perhaps I could explain them myself.

Others in the party were equally unwelcoming. It took me a lot of effort and hard work to make myself acceptable to the BJP workers at the grassroots level. Many of my friends at the local level, and from my earlier party, also joined the BJP with me. Their company did lend me some comfort.

On my part, I decided to become hyper active in party affairs at all levels, to prove myself and enhance my acceptability within its ranks. On two occasions, I even persuaded my fellow party workers in Hazaribagh to undertake trips to Patna to participate in party programmes, once on bicycles and a second time on motorbikes. The bicycle trip was very special. I had organised it to reach Patna in time to participate in a Kisan Panchayat at Gandhi Maidan. This had been

organised by the state party to raise issues concerning farmers, with special reference to the ill effects of the Dunkel proposals.

The infamous Dunkel proposals had been presented to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Geneva by its secretary general Arthur Dunkel, as a compromise formula to conclude negotiations under the Uruguay round. The proposals were weighted heavily in favour of developed countries and militated against the interests of farmers in developing countries, especially India.

It took us four days to reach Patna, and we spent three nights on the way. On our way to Patna, we stopped at every village and town, held public meetings and explained to people the dangers of the Dunkel proposals for a developing country like India, especially in the field of agriculture. There were around 200 of us on bicycles with two party flags on each bike. We made for quite a sight as we pedalled together.

We arrived in Patna's Gandhi Maidan in full strength and in high spirits. Even though we parked ourselves in a corner of the Maidan and quite far from the dais, the leaders present did notice us and even requested me to join them on stage. I obliged but insisted that the two boys, who had come running to Patna all the way from Hazaribagh ahead of the bicycles, also be invited to the stage and introduced to the crowd. This was duly done, but I was disappointed at not being invited to address the meeting, as I was one of the few people who really understood the issues involved.

Since Vajpayee had to go back to Delhi early, he insisted on speaking earlier. It was during his speech that Shatrughan Sinha made his dramatic appearance on the stage. The crowd went wild at his sight as he moved across the stage to accept their ovation. Though Vajpayee's speech was disrupted, he took it in his stride and made his famous statement that if Shatrughan Sinha was 'Bihari Babu' he was 'Atal Bihari'. The crowd lapped up every word and was completely mesmerised by Vajpayee's oration. I was also very impressed by his speech. He knew how to relate to the audience, how to sway them and how to entertain them even while conveying a serious message. There is no doubt that he was a magician when it came to oratory.

The bicycle trip was taken note of by the central leadership of the party. But when Advani learnt that I had not been given a chance to address the meeting in Patna, he was very unhappy. I was more than compensated later, when I was given the honour of addressing a massive rally held by the party at the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi to oppose the same Dunkel proposals.

During this period, I undertook many train journeys between Patna and Delhi, and between Koderma and Delhi, which was the nearest railhead for Hazaribagh. Of course, as a former Rajya Sabha MP, I was entitled to free railway travel in AC

second class. One chilly day in January 1995, as I was returning to Delhi from Hazaribagh, I casually picked up a Hindi newspaper at the New Delhi railway station. I was surprised to read that my name was being considered for the forthcoming assembly elections in Bihar.

Kailashpati Mishra happened to be in Delhi at the time, and I immediately sought a meeting with him to ask about the news report. He only added to the mystery by telling me the tale of Mahabharata's Ghatotkach instead! The moral of the story? That as a disciplined soldier of the party, I had to obey its orders and make whatever sacrifice was required, just as Ghatotkach had done during the Mahabharata war.

I was in a state of shock. Contesting the Bihar assembly elections had perhaps been the farthest from my mind, and I decided to seek a meeting with Advani. I told him both about the newspaper report and my conversation with Mishra. Advani explained the reasons for the decision in detail. According to his information, the election was likely to throw up a hung assembly, leading to the possibility of the BJP leading a coalition government. The party wanted a winning candidate who would be acceptable to the coalition partners, and I was the one the BJP leadership had chosen. Advani's logic was not only reassuring but also flattering, and I was glad to accept his reasoning.

Many people, including Chandra Shekhar, were unhappy at the thought of my contesting the assembly elections. Chandra Shekhar even conveyed his disapproval to me via Arun Nehru, with whom both he and I had become quite friendly by then. Nehru asked me to accompany him to see Chandra Shekhar in his Bhondsi ashram, where I relayed Advani's explanations behind the move. Chandra Shekhar reluctantly accepted the rationale, while Arun Nehru offered me his full support.

The constituency that the BJP selected for me in Bihar was Ranchi. It had long been a stronghold of the party and I was expected to have an easy passage to the Bihar assembly from there. However, there was a minor problem. BJP's Gulshan Ajmani, who was a sitting MLA from Ranchi, had to be persuaded not only to step down in my favour but also to lend me his full support. It was a tall order, indeed. Unknown to me, Advani summoned Ajmani to Delhi and, after explaining the circumstances to him, asked him to meet and invite me to Ranchi to contest the election from his constituency.

Ajmani came to see me, along with Ajay Maru, a scion of the Maru family in

Ranchi, which, apart from other businesses, also ran the city's leading daily *Ranchi Express.* He fulfilled his duty by formally inviting me to contest the election from Ranchi after which the three of us decided to travel together to Ranchi by air, arriving there to an enthusiastic welcome by the BJP workers.

The election campaign in Ranchi was long and arduous. Maru found me an apartment in Panchwati in a block of flats on Kanke Road in Ranchi, where Nilima and I set up home. Ranchi is a purely urban constituency. Therefore, the mode of campaigning was generally from door to door. I used to get up early in the morning and visit the various *mohallas* on foot—from house to house, shop to shop, and factory to factory—while also addressing public meetings at important places. Madhav Singh, a constable of Ranchi Police was assigned to me as my security guard. Over two decades later, I am happy to note, he is still with me. As is Harendra Singh, another constable who joined me a while later when I became Leader of Opposition in the Bihar assembly.

The chief election commissioner, TN Seshan, had made life simpler for candidates by laying down strict rules of campaigning. Accounts had to be maintained in detail, and daily. EC observers were everywhere and, being a stickler for rules, I followed the instructions both in letter and spirit. Party workers were often dismayed because there were no sumptuous snacks or comfortable vehicles for them. Like me, they were also required to campaign on foot and often on empty stomachs. Our troubles only increased when Seshan extended the date of the election by another 15 days. Sustaining the gruelling campaign schedule and meeting its expenses was not easy, but we learned to adapt somehow.

My wife had put together a powerful team of women who campaigned door to door for me, and on their own. Their contribution to my ultimate victory was enormous. My friends and supporters from Hazaribagh also came to Ranchi in large numbers to help with my campaign.

Gulshan Ajmani, on the other hand, proved to be difficult to deal with. He had no choice except to obey Advani's order, but in his heart he was not really with me. I knew this but there was no point in my showing a lack of confidence in him. Later, in fact, he became quite openly inimical to me and gradually faded away from politics. Lalu Yadav came to campaign for his candidate and even made a speech saying I had no business contesting an election from Ranchi and that 'the people should send me from Ranchi to Karachi'.

A leading English newspaper published from Kolkata carried a comparative assessment of the contesting candidates' electoral prospects and concluded that while I was sure to lose the election badly because I was an outsider, another candidate of a very small party was likely to win it with a handsome majority. I won the election by over 20,000 votes whereas the 'predicted winner' only got

around 2000 votes.

So much for accurate election reporting by the media.

The counting of votes went on for two nights and three days. According to the practice prevalent then, all the ballot papers were first taken out of ballot boxes, mixed together to hide the identity of the polling booths during counting, arranged in bundles of fifty each, and then put back in the boxes before being taken to the counting tables to be counted again, candidate-wise. An entire day and a night was spent in taking the ballot papers out from their boxes, preparing the bundles of fifty, putting them back in the boxes and then taking away the boxes to the store room.

I was present throughout the counting process. On the second night of counting, as I dozed off in a corner of the hall, I was shaken awake by a great commotion. Supporters of the Janata Dal candidate were loudly protesting that a counting officer had deliberately put a bundle of their votes into my account. JD party workers from the adjoining counting halls rushed into ours, unauthorised, and joined the protest. I chose not to interfere as the matter was between the JD candidate and the returning officer. But because of this fracas, the counting came to a sudden halt.

I waited for a long time for the exercise to resume, but when the returning officer, who had left the hall with the JD candidate, did not come back even after a few hours, my supporters started to get edgy. I went out to the temporary office of the sub divisional officer (SDO), who was the returning officer, only to find him still busy trying to placate the JD candidate. I sternly warned him that if counting did not resume at once, he'd have another protest on his hands. My admonition had the desired effect and he soon returned to the hall, where the process was resumed. Finally, on the third day, it was over.

It took the returning officer a few more hours to get the clearance from the EC in Delhi before he handed over the certificate of election to me. A huge crowd of supporters was impatiently waiting outside for me, including my wife. Garlands in hand, they were eager to welcome me as news of my victory had already started flashing in the media. I was taken in a victory procession around the town where my electorate also got a chance to congratulate me.

With this, I chalked up my very first victory in a direct election by a handsome margin of over 20,000 votes, no less.

Lalu Yadav secured a comfortable majority on his own, following a resounding victory in the election, and was sworn in as the CM of Bihar once again. The opportunity that a hung assembly would have created, as envisaged by Advani, never did arise. However, the BJP had emerged as the second-largest party, earning itself the Leader of the Opposition (LOP) post.

CHAPTER 20

FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE

The central leadership of the party wanted me to lead the legislature party. In Patna, the supporters of Sushil Kumar Modi were keen that he be elected instead, and had even gathered in large numbers at the party office to lend their support to him. However, before the meeting, Sushil Modi was told to propose my name for the post in the legislature party meeting. He did as asked, dutifully albeit indifferently.

Even as the proposal was approved by acclaim, his supporters shouted slogans against me at the party office. In fact, throughout my tenure, a section of the media kept repeating that my candidature had been imposed from above, even as Sushil Modi had been the real choice of the legislators. It had negligible impact, as my performance in the assembly soon dwarfed their allegations, into insignificance.

My tenure as Leader of the Opposition in the Bihar assembly, although brief, was extremely fruitful, productive and interesting. Perhaps, it was my frequent skirmishes with Lalu Yadav or various lively exchanges in the Assembly, or the fact that I was back as an MLA in a state I had long served as a bureaucrat I must admit I enjoyed every moment of it.

Leading the Opposition

I was allotted a double-storeyed bungalow in Patna, where we planned to settle down comfortably for the next few years. Or at least that is what I thought. I took my role as LOP seriously, did my homework diligently and soon proved to Lalu Yadav and his cohorts that I would not be cowed down. There were many exchanges between Lalu and me where I got the better of him.

Once, when I was speaking on the Motion of Thanks on the Governor's address, some MLAs from the treasury benches tried to heckle me by saying that it appeared as if I was speaking on the budget. I countered them by saying that they should wait patiently until they heard me on the budget. In his reply, Lalu Yadav referred to the plane incident, where he had refused to take note of me, saying that he did not even remember it. Yet, he added, I had taken it to heart and turned against him. He repeatedly referred to my leaving the party and joining the BJP as the result of some sort of misunderstanding and kept referring to me as 'one of us'.

When the state budget finally came up before the Assembly, I spoke on it after a great deal of preparation. The budget documents were all in Hindi and there were some technical terms that were unfamiliar to me. No one in the Assembly secretariat could tell me what the words meant, so I decided to speak to the officer who dealt with the budget in the finance department to find out their real meaning. He, too, pleaded ignorance. Ultimately, it was the finance secretary SN Sinha who looked up the English version, sent to the Centre for presentation in Parliament during the brief President's Rule imposed in Bihar, and told me what the words meant.

I delivered quite an effective speech on the budget. In his meandering reply, Lalu Yadav related all kinds of irrelevant stories from the past, especially relating to the JP movement, but did not answer any of the substantive points raised by me. He spoke for almost two hours, after which I stood up to protest that he had not answered a single point raised in my speech. Yadav responded by dumping a huge bundle of papers on the table of the House. 'Here is my answer to all the points raised by you on the budget,' he said.

I strongly objected to the Speaker against this, and my reply to Lalu Yadav on this occasion became quite famous. I said, 'What is the point in your presenting a budget, Laluji, which you do not even understand? Instead I would suggest that we play *Okka, Bokka, Teen Tarokka*, (a game played by kids in Bihar) that you perhaps understand better!' Lalu, not one to be left behind, retorted that he did, indeed, understand it better, saying '*Laua laathi, chandan kaathi, ijail bijail, paan pichka de!*', thereby reciting the rest of the couplet I had mentioned.

On another day, I raised a point of procedure in the Assembly. Lalu Yadav replied that while I may have some experience of Parliament, I had no experience of the Assembly and did not understand parliamentary democracy fully. I countered with: 'Laluji, I understand parliamentary democracy and can teach you the subject for the next twenty years!' The following day, Patna newspapers carried our exchange as front-page news.

And so, on it went.

I used the Assembly library regularly. Its staff was very happy because it was

after a long time, they told me, that a member was even visiting the library. One day, I had selected some reference books for a debate in the House, which a peon was carrying for me. A Congress MLA Om Prakash Lal noticed this and asked him, 'Who are you carrying the books for?' When he mentioned my name, the MLA commented that he was not surprised because I was one of the few '*padha likha'* (educated) members of the House. He later narrated the story to me himself.

On the strength of my performance in the Assembly, I soon emerged as an important leader of the party in the state. People began comparing me with Karpoori Thakur in his days as LOP in the Assembly—a compliment I cherished. Like him, I used to travel throughout the state, generally by car and at night, to avoid wasting the day. This way, I often landed up being present at various incidents around the state before others.

Around September 1995, a major accident took place in a coal mine near Dhanbad resulting in the unfortunate death of 64 miners. A deep coal mine had suddenly become flooded, unfortunately leaving no chance for the trapped miners to escape. An earlier 1979 film *Kaala Patthar*, starring Amitabh Bachchan, Shatrughan Sinha and Shashi Kapoor, had been based on another such incident.

I had just returned to Patna from a visit when I received a call from PN Singh, our MLA from Dhanbad, who suggested that we should both take the overnight train and visit the accident site at the earliest. I immediately agreed, and we reached the spot early the next morning. As we were winding up our visit to the site of the tragic accident, I saw Lalu Yadav arrive. He was quite surprised to see that I had reached the place before him, despite the state plane and helicopter at his command.

On another occasion, and under protest, I had given up the security provided to me by the state government. This was after some people had been killed in the Champaran district of North Bihar by dacoits. Raising the issue in the Assembly, I had offered to give up my personal security to counter the government's excuse that such incidents were due to the inadequacy of the police force. Lalu Yadav was not happy with my announcement and I even remember him pleading with me to retain my security. I also recall paying no heed to his pleas.

It was after this that we came across a gruesome incident on our way to Patna from Purnea, one night. By then I had no security, though a couple of MLAs were accompanying me in separate vehicles. Suddenly, upon crossing Khagaria we came across a massive traffic jam with trucks and other vehicles parked on both sides of the road. We drove as far as we could, and I stepped out of the car when we could go no further.

I told my wife, who was also with me, to wait in the car, and walked over to enquire into the matter. Some people recognised me immediately and excitedly

told me what had happened. It appeared that around eight to ten people had been brutally murdered in an adjoining village earlier that day. Following this, the villagers had laid the dead bodies across the road and were holding up traffic.

The local leaders informed me that the murders had been the result of a caste war and then named a powerful caste leader of the area as being responsible for them. They requested me to intervene by persuading the administration to accede to the villagers' demands. A large crowd had already assembled by then. I soon learnt that the local DM and SP had already reached the spot and were waiting in a house close by. I went to meet them and enquire into their plan of action. They said they were waiting for the morning, had already called for reinforcements, and would only be able to act once they arrived.

My administrative instincts kicked in and I advised them against any delay, as the crowd was only likely to swell in numbers – making it difficult to use any force to disperse it. The better course of action would be to negotiate a settlement with the crowd and send the bodies for postmortem, I advised.

The leaders present were demanding the immediate presence of CM Lalu Yadav. I sent the DM to the nearest phone booth to make a call to Yadav and personally inform him about the incident, as well as about my presence on the spot. The DM succeeded in talking to Yadav. On his return, he told me privately that Lalu had lost interest the moment he had heard that the dead belonged to an upper caste. He had, however, instructed the DM to find a solution under my guidance.

Negotiations between the local leaders and the officials were held soon thereafter in my presence, and the officials agreed to give them a written assurance on their various demands. At last, the crowd agreed to allow the bodies to be sent for postmortem and lifted the blockade. I heaved a sigh of relief but left the place only after the jam had been cleared.

Once again, my years of experience as an IAS officer, and dealing with similar crises, had come to my rescue in coping with a tricky situation.

In fact, travelling in Bihar by road was rarely uneventful. Any long journey was bound to throw up some problem or the other, including frequent traffic jams. The drivers of commercial vehicles, then as now, rarely observe traffic rules and, in their hurry to move ahead of the others, often use whatever space is available on the road, thus blocking oncoming traffic. They do not mind wasting long hours in their anxiety to save a few minutes. Today, with good four-lane national highways, where high speed driving is easier, the training of drivers and instilling road discipline in them has become crucial to keep traffic moving smoothly and to save countless innocent lives that are being lost daily.

Car journeys at night often required a halt for tea at a *dhaba* (roadside eatery). I would generally choose a corner of the *dhaba* to sit by myself and enjoy a quiet

cup of tea, but people would often recognise me and walk over for a chat. The *dhaba* owner would often refuse to take money, arguing that it was because I was serving the people of Bihar. I was greatly touched by such kind gestures.

I do not know what would have happened to me and where I would have ended up had I continued as an MLA in Bihar and as Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly. But, as on many occasions in the past, fate intervened yet again and changed the course of my life.

The Hawala case

I had been sent by the party to Silchar in Assam to campaign for the state assembly elections. I addressed a large congregation of party workers on the day of my arrival there and talked to them about how to prepare for the polls. In the evening, when I returned to the circuit house where I was staying, I received a call from KN Govindacharya, the BJP's general secretary. What he said on the phone left me stunned and in a state of severe shock.

He told me that the CBI had filed a charge sheet in the infamous Hawala case where, among others, they had also chargesheeted Advani and me. Advani had already resigned as Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha as well as from his Lok Sabha seat. However, the party had decided that others from the BJP, who had also been chargesheeted in the case (like me), should take no such step. I listened to him in utter shock and disbelief and told him that I would come to Delhi and discuss the matter further.

After a while, Kabindra Purkayastha, our MP from Silchar, came to pick me up for dinner. I told him about Govindacharya's phone call and suggested we first go to a place where I could watch the news on TV. He took me to a friend's house, where we watched news that was dominated by the Hawala story. I told Purkayastha that I would cut my programme short and leave for Delhi the following day and asked him to get me on the first flight out. While I was quite disturbed by the news, I found that Purkayastha was quite nonchalant about it as if it was a routine affair.

I spent the night in great agony. Sleep had deserted me completely. How would I face my family and friends? How would I face the rest of the world? The

questions haunted me throughout the night. I must admit that I even contemplated suicide in those agonising hours. I felt as if something very unclean had been thrown at me and had stuck to my body.

Purkayastha informed me the next morning that the flight from Silchar to Kolkata had been cancelled because of PM Narasimha Rao's flight schedule. The only way I could travel to Delhi was to take an afternoon flight from Silchar to Guwahati, and go from there to Kolkata before connecting to Delhi. This would waste an entire day but then I had no choice.

Meanwhile Purkayastha suggested I attend a few political functions. I agreed, because I did not wish to be left alone with my thoughts. I did notice, though, that nobody seemed really bothered about what the CBI had done and continued to treat me with the same respect as before. Even the IAS probationer under training at Silchar, who was also staying at the circuit house, came to see me and appeared very happy on meeting me. I was both surprised and relieved. The other programmes also went as scheduled, and I received a warm welcome everywhere.

I finally arrived in Delhi late the following evening. My wife was equally shocked at the developments, but we decided to face the challenge as best as we could. The case was false, the evidence weak. I had explained my position to the CBI earlier and had never expected them to file a chargesheet against me based on such flimsy evidence. Obviously, Narasimha Rao had decided to use the Hawala case to corner his political adversaries, both within and outside his own party, before the looming Lok Sabha elections. I was merely part of the collateral damage.

The next day, I went to see Govindacharya at the party office. I told him that since I had lost my effectiveness in the Bihar assembly after the charge sheet, I should also be allowed to resign like Advani. Advani had gone to Bombay so Govindacharya advised me to go see Vajpayee. Devdas (Bapu) Apte, my friend and a prominent leader of the BJP, offered to accompany me to Vajpayee's place. I was surprised when Vajpayee asked Apte to wait outside, to speak to me alone, especially since I did not know Vajpayee well enough at the time.

In fact, I had had a rather disappointing experience with him earlier when, after joining the BJP, I had asked for time to see him. On reaching his place at the appointed time, I had been told that he was out for a function and would not be back anytime soon. I remember feeling badly let down. I used to meet him in party meetings, of course, but didn't call on him again following that incident, for a long time after.

Meeting him now, I presented my case as forcefully as I could. I argued that I would no longer be effective as LOP in the Bihar assembly, and saw no point in continuing as an ordinary member. Thus, I should be allowed to resign from it

immediately. I vividly remember what he told me that day. He said 'K*arm kand to pura karna hoga*'. 'Karm kand' refers to the ritual services performed by Brahmins at important occasions. What he meant was that since it was BJP's Parliamentary Board that had taken the earlier decision, the same body would decide my fate as well.

I told him that I wanted to resign immediately, without waiting for the meeting of the Board. He then suggested I speak to Advani, which I did upon my return to the party office. I gave him the same reason I had given Vajpayee and he agreed only when I told him that Vajpayee had no objection. Govindacharya was also privy to our entire conversation.

The next day, I took a train to Patna, where I received a warm welcome on my arrival at the railway station. I drove straight to the Assembly, met the Speaker and handed in my resignation. I then went to Ranchi and wound up my affairs there, after which I undertook a tour of Bihar to tell people about the political game Narasimha Rao had played in the case. I also vacated my official accommodation in Patna and moved back to my own house in Rajendra Nagar.

Advani appointed me as a party spokesperson after my resignation from the Bihar Assembly and I started spending more time in Delhi. Sushma Swaraj was the other and main spokesperson, while I generally spoke on economic issues. One day, Natwar Singh and P. Shiv Shankar—both senior leaders of the Congress party and both co-accused in the Hawala case—dropped by to see me at my mother-in-law's Vasant Vihar house in Delhi, where we were once again staying. We exchanged notes and concluded that our political careers had effectively come to an end, as the case was likely to drag on for years. They were both very critical of Narasimha Rao.

I appeared in a Tis Hazari Court to secure bail, where my nephew Sanjiv Saurabh filled my bail bonds and extended the guarantees. I appeared in court on a few other occasions as well. I preferred to do so as privately as possible, unlike some of the other accused who would go there with a multitude of supporters and much fanfare.

Fortunately, the case did not last long, and April 1997 brought us good news. VC Shukla, a senior Congress leader and my former Cabinet colleague in the Chandra Shekhar government, was the first to get relief from the Delhi High Court, which threw out the charges framed against him by the trial court. Advani also got similar relief from the High Court, following which the trial court did not frame charges against the rest of us and discharged us instead. The CBI, under fire from the Delhi High Court for presenting a weak case, appealed against the order in the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court upheld the High Court order and thus ended a sordid

chapter in Indian politics and in our personal lives.

Justice for us came in a little over a year's time, in contrast to the delays we had suspected, and we did not have to wait for years as our careers and lives hung in the balance. On 23 July 1997, the charges against me were quashed, among over a dozen other discharges that followed Shukla's and Advani's. It took three more years, however, for the hawala case itself to wind up with the last dismissal in January 2000.

1996-1998

The Lok Sabha elections of 1996 took place amidst all this uncertainty. Advani had decided not to contest as the case against him was still on, and I chose to follow suit.

I would have been the natural BJP candidate from Hazaribagh for the 1996 elections. Since I decided not to contest, we had to find another candidate. My choice was Mahavir Lal Vishwakarma, a recently retired school-teacher. Vishwakarma was no stranger to the BJP as he had been a prominent member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

My view prevailed and Vishwakarma was chosen to contest from the Hazaribagh seat. I joined his campaign and worked hard for his victory. He won by a handsome margin of over 75,000 votes. This was the second time the BJP had won the Hazaribagh Lok Sabha seat; the first being in 1989 when Yadunath Pandey had won it on the back of the communal riots of 1988.

BJP emerged as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha and Vajpayee was invited by the President to form the government. However, it fell after just thirteen days for want of numbers. HD Deve Gowda replaced Vajpayee in June 1996, but his government lasted only a little over ten months before the Congress brought it down. Following that, IK Gujral was sworn in as PM in April 1997 in his place. Gujral soon became another victim of the Congress party's conspiracy and his government was also short lived. This led to a general election in 1998, only two years after the last one.

Political events were indeed moving fast and my attachment to Hazaribagh was also getting deeper. Back in 1992, I had bought a piece of land about ten

kilometres outside Hazaribagh, towards Ranchi, to settle there permanently. It was a mango orchard and I have still maintained it as one, with a few small two-room buildings that do not obstruct the trees. Settling down in Hazaribagh was fulfilling a promise I had made to its people during my election campaign of 1984. I used to visit the place regularly and would stay with friends for I did not have a place of my own. Acquiring my own place, however, changed my commitment to the constituency and its people dramatically. I was now truly a resident of a village in Hazaribagh and nobody could question that belonging. I also got more deeply involved in local politics.

Some of the senior local leaders of the party had not liked my joining the BJP, as I have already mentioned. They probably viewed me as a threat to their prospects and tried their best to undermine my position, locally. My rise in the BJP, however, served as a dampener on their plans and as a source of strength to my supporters. These included a few of my followers in the SJP, who had joined the BJP by following my example. The struggle continued as long as I remained in the BJP. Today, my son Jayant is facing the same opposition from the same people. Some things don't ever change.

Local politics is very different and much more complicated with all its pulls and pressures, dissensions and rivalries, and the preoccupation of the people with their own little problems, amid the complete absence of any higher motivation. Politics at the state level is only a little better. National-level politics is a shade better than both the state and local levels, where you can survive, and even prosper, on the strength of your intellect, understanding of national and international issues and your rapport with the top leadership of the party. But then there is no alternative to grassroots politics in a democracy. Thus, those who spend their life in Rajya Sabha miss out on all the 'fun' of local-level politics.

The Hawala case against me was over in July 1997. After being cleared of all charges, I decided to visit my son, Sumant, who was working with the ING Barings Bank in London. My wife and I spent a lovely month in London with Sumant and Vaishali. We travelled to Scotland and the Lake District and had a wonderfully relaxing time. Fully refreshed, I returned to India, ready to face new challenges.

An interesting medical experience I had in London during this trip is worth mentioning. One morning I suddenly felt an acute pain in my stomach. Sumant called for an ambulance and I was taken to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital close to South Kensington, where he lived. The doctors gave me an injection and the pain subsided, but they felt that I should stay in the hospital at least for a day. Some other investigations were also carried out.

I felt fully fit by the evening and was discharged the following morning.

Though I did not have a medical insurance cover in the UK, the hospital authorities allowed me to leave without even giving me a bill. Months later, on my return to India, I received a bill from them for my treatment. By then, I was back in the Government of India as finance minister and promptly obtained the necessary clearances to pay it.

I often compare this with the experience that common people have in India's hospitals, where extortion rather than compassion is the name of the game. The state of Indian healthcare services, especially in the rural areas, leaves much to be desired.

Back to the Centre: 1998 Elections

On my return to India, I was summoned by Advani who told me that BJP's central leadership wanted me to take over as the president of the party in Bihar. The IK Gujral government was doddering and could collapse at any time. Thus, the BJP wanted me to lead the party during the Lok Sabha elections in Bihar, which had 54 Lok Sabha seats. I thanked Advani for his confidence in me and left for Patna. No one had any doubt that the central leadership's wishes would prevail, but that did not prevent a small faction within the party from indulging in some theatrics.

There was a splinter group that was opposed to Kailashpati Mishra and wanted to make its presence felt. I had to placate them, which meant meeting each of them individually as well as all of them collectively. They had a few demands, such as people from their group getting party positions, and I agreed to consider their claims. Govindacharya also played a very important role in mobilising the party workers in my support.

On the day of the election, a rumour began doing the rounds that this group would either put up a candidate against me or boycott the election altogether. Their absence from the scene added more grist to the rumour mill. Fortunately, they did turn up in time to support my candidature. I was elected unopposed and unanimously, and a heavy responsibility thus fell on my shoulders, to lead the BJP at the state level during the Lok Sabha elections.

I chose my team carefully and began an intensive tour of Bihar. I even

encouraged deserving people from other parties to join the BJP. My return to state politics was generally welcomed by party workers and the people of Bihar. I was also happy to be back.

The Congress party withdrew support from the IK Gujral government in November 1997, a mere seven months after Gujral had been sworn in as PM. Since no one else was ready to form a government, the Lok Sabha was dissolved on 4 December 1997 and a fresh election ordered. The Election Commission announced three-phase elections in Bihar, to be held in February 1998.

During one of my subsequent visits to Delhi, Advani suddenly asked me to name the constituency I would like to contest the Lok Sabha election from. I told him that I had the responsibility for 54 seats in Bihar and would prefer to be free to move around and ensure the victory of party candidates in as many seats as possible. Advani insisted that I contest the elections and asked me again to name a constituency. I had to make an immediate choice and couldn't help but waver between Hazaribagh and Patna.

On an impulse, I chose Hazaribagh. I could have easily settled for Patna where I was born and raised. Patna was home to me like no other place in the world. But I was also in love with Hazaribagh and was keen to represent it in the Lok Sabha. Like Ranchi earlier, where there had been a sitting BJP MLA, Hazaribagh also had a sitting BJP MP—Mahavir Lal Vishwakarma. Advani despatched Govindacharya to talk to Vishwakarma, who persuaded him to stand down and agree to my contesting from that seat.

Vishwakarma was also persuaded to support me. He was later elected to the Bihar Legislative Council and given an important party position during the Lok Sabha elections. But just like Gulshan Ajmani earlier, Vishwakarma never did reconcile himself to the loss of his seat and turned against me, even forgetting the role I had played in his becoming an MP in the first place. In fact, he contested against me as an independent candidate in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, after being expelled from the party along with KP Sharma.

The people of Hazaribagh generally welcomed my candidature, even as detractors, both within the party and outside it, left no stone unturned to defeat me. As in the Ranchi assembly election, so in Hazaribagh, a section of the media was also keen to queer the pitch for me. I remember how a lady reporter from a leading English national daily, also published from Ranchi, came to Hazaribagh to accompany me on the campaign trail for a day. She went back to Patna and wrote an extremely damaging piece, predicting that I was going to lose the election badly. This is exactly what a Calcutta-based English daily had done during the Ranchi election. My opponents also tried to remind the people of Hazaribagh that I had sold the country's gold in 1991, exhorting them not to vote for me.

All of this only strengthened my resolve to push myself, and the party's fortunes, harder.

When the results finally came in, I got 46.71 per cent of the votes and defeated the closest candidate by a massive margin of over 1.63 lakh votes,[9] having led from the very first round of counting and recording a victory from all the six assembly segments in the Hazaribagh Lok Sabha constituency.

The performance of the party in Bihar was also impressive. BJP won 20 of the 32 seats it had contested. I had campaigned for the party candidates throughout the state, especially in the (currently) Jharkhand part of it. The BJP also recorded a creditable victory in other parts of the country and emerged as the single-largest party. Unlike in 1996, getting coalition partners in 1998 did not prove difficult and we were able to stitch a coalition together for a comfortable majority in the Lok Sabha. In fact, it became clear immediately after the results that there would be a BJP-led coalition government in Delhi, with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the prime minister.

Once in Delhi, I found the city agog with rumours about Cabinet formation. One portfolio of great interest to everyone was that of finance. I was invited to participate in various TV shows where the anchors often wanted to know if I was a candidate for the coveted post. After a few days of this, I got so exasperated that I decided to leave Delhi for a quieter life in Patna.

I may have left Delhi, but the questions followed me to Patna. Sanjay Pugalia, who currently heads *The Quint*, was putting together a TV show from Delhi and arranged for me to participate in it from Patna. When he came to the favourite question about the finance ministry, he asked me casually, 'Were you not finance minister earlier in the short-lived Chandra Shekhar government? Are you not a candidate for the post again?' I thanked him for at least remembering that I was also a former finance minister but clarified that it was the prime minister's prerogative to decide. In my mind, however, I was certainly a candidate. This was not so much because I had served as finance minister earlier but because I was the main spokesperson of the party on economic issues.

Jaswant Singh, who had been Vajpayee's finance minister in BJP's thirteen-day government, had lost the 1998 Lok Sabha election and was not a member of the Rajya Sabha either, getting elected to his third term only in July of that year. For me, while the finance ministry would have been welcome, I would have been more than satisfied with the commerce portfolio.

It was a ministry I wanted to head for many personal reasons. I had worked in Udyog Bhawan as an under secretary, a deputy secretary, and as special assistant to the MoS for Industry, AP Sharma. In my long years on deputation to the Centre, I had spent the maximum time in Udyog Bhawan, where I knew every entry gate,

and the various rooms I had occupied, quite well. I had also served in Germany promoting India's exports. So, I was familiar with the commerce ministry's work much more than that of the Ministry of Finance. However, by a twist of fate, I found myself in the latter once again.

CHAPTER 21

BACK IN THE HOT SEAT

There are many stories about how I ultimately landed in the finance ministry. Vajpayee was probably keen to appoint Jaswant Singh as the finance minister once again. However, the Sangh had insisted that those who had lost the election should not be appointed ministers in the government so soon. Thus, both Jaswant Singh and Pramod Mahajan, who had both lost the Lok Sabha elections, were ruled out of the Cabinet. Advani then persuaded Vajpayee to allot the finance portfolio to me, given that I was the party's spokesperson on economic issues.

Back in Patna, I was blissfully unaware of all these developments, especially the rumours circulating about the finance portfolio. A day before the swearing-in on 19 March, Govindacharya spoke to me and suggested that I return to Delhi. Though it could not be construed as an official invitation to join the government, I took his advice and flew to Delhi the same day. There had been no intimation yet, my wife informed me upon my reaching Delhi. I had no option except to wait, somewhat impatiently now. At about 10:30 p.m., I finally got a call from Advani who asked me to come to Rashtrapati Bhawan the following morning to be sworn in, without indicating the portfolio that awaited me. But this time around, I was certain that it would be Cabinet rank and not MoS.

The swearing-in ceremony took place in the forecourt of the Rashtrapati Bhawan, just like it had with the Chandra Shekhar government. Ministers of Cabinet rank and ministers of state were administered the oath of office by President KR Narayanan, along with the prime minister. Portfolios were not announced immediately but only later that evening.

I found out what mine was in the most interesting way.

A brief, formal meeting of the Council of Ministers was held soon after the swearing in. As Prime Minister Vajpayee was walking toward his room in South Block after the meeting, I caught up with him and asked for his permission to visit my constituency before the next Cabinet meeting. He looked at me and said, '*Tab Budget kaun banayega?*' It was a typical Vajpayee response: saying a lot without

really saying it. I was pleasantly surprised. The formal announcement of my appointment as finance minister was made the same evening. The next morning a big crowd of people, who wished to congratulate me, invaded my little two-room apartment in Vasant Vihar. I had no place to hide.

A major problem, however, arose the next morning. I was summoned by the PM to his house on Safdarjung Road. Jaswant Singh was already there, engaged in a serious discussion with Vajpayee. Vajpayee told me that Jayalalithaa was insisting on RK Kumar, the MoS of her party who had been assigned to the Ministry of Finance, being given independent charge of the revenue department. I told Vajpayee that, given my limited experience of the ministry, such an arrangement would completely cripple the finance minister, making it difficult for him to even prepare the Budget.

After hearing my reply, Vajpayee told Jaswant Singh to speak to Jayalalithaa again. Singh went out into the garden to speak to her on the cell phone and, on his return, told us that she was still insisting on it. The least she would settle for was an independent charge for the MoS, who would work under me only in name. I was told by Vajpayee to find a solution to the problem at my level, in consultation with Kumar. I went back to the ministry and told the finance secretary, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, to use the versatility of the English language to solve the problem. He returned with a skillfully drafted order that would satisfy Jayalalithaa without compromising my authority in any way. RK Kumar was also happy with the arrangement and never created any problems for me.

The Buddha smiles again

Being part of India's ruling establishment was often full of surprises. I remember how I was summoned to Vajpayee's residence in Safdarjung Road one morning in early May 1998. He did not meet me in the room where he generally met visitors. Instead, I was taken to his bedroom. I guessed immediately that what he was about to tell me was not only important but also highly confidential.

'*What could it be?*' I wondered? Suddenly, my confidence seemed to have deserted me. Would he ask me to step down? Was he about to change my portfolio? Had I committed some unpardonable mistake? With thoughts like these

flashing through my mind, I was suddenly face-to-face with the PM in his bedroom. He asked me to sit and then broke a piece of stunning news that left me feeling both proud and shaken.

'I have decided to go for nuclear tests in the next few days', he said. 'It is a highly secret operation because the world powers are not going to like it. They may take punitive action against us, especially in the economic field. So, we must be prepared to meet any challenge the move would throw up on the economic front. I thought I should warn you in advance, so that you are not taken by surprise when it happens.' I listened to him in complete silence. It took me some time to absorb the full import of what he had told me so calmly.

I did not ask him who else in the government he had taken into confidence in this matter, knowing instinctively that the number would be extremely limited. I was also aware that when Narasimha Rao had wanted to conduct nuclear tests in December 1995, the information had leaked out and he was prevented from doing so by the Americans. Keeping the information secret was, in fact, going to be one of the most important challenges that we were bound to face.

I returned from Vajpayee's residence more than a little shaken, I must admit. There was no question of sharing the information with anyone, not even with my wife. How would I prepare for tackling the economic consequences that were sure to follow, if I could not discuss it with anyone? I had to plan for it, based on a healthy amount of conjecture, and all alone, without sharing it with anyone. I agonised over the issue for days on end.

Finally, the day arrived.

On 11 May 1998, I was in my office when I received a call from Jaswant Singh, who had taken over as deputy chairman of the Planning Commission by then. He asked me to come to 5, Race Course Road for an important meeting with the PM. I could not contain my curiosity and blurted out on the phone, 'Has it happened?' Jaswant did not respond, and I immediately left for 5, RCR.

The prime minister occupies three bungalows on Race Course Road. No. 3 is his residence, No. 5 his personal guest-house and No. 7 is his home office. Meeting at No. 5 was unusual, considering that all the other meetings were held at No. 7. The people assembled in 5 on that fateful day were home minister LK Advani, defence minister George Fernandes, principal secretary to the PM Brajesh Mishra, Jaswant Singh and me. We were informed that the nuclear tests had been carried out successfully at Pokhran in Rajasthan, as planned. More tests were planned for May 13, but now the news could be broken to the rest of the world. We all felt that it should be done by Vajpayee himself.

A very brief press statement was quickly drafted, the media was summoned, and it was decided that Vajpayee would read it out but not take any questions from

the media. This is what he said:

> 'I have a brief announcement to make…Today, at 1545 hours, India conducted three underground nuclear tests in the Pokharan [sic] range. The tests conducted were with a fission device, a low-yield device, and a thermonuclear device…The measured yields are in line with expected values… Measurements have confirmed that there was no release of radioactivity into the atmosphere. These were contained explosions like in the experiment conducted in May 1974. I warmly congratulate the scientists and engineers who have carried out the successful tests. Thank you very much indeed.'

It was also felt that the PM should write a personal letter to the then US President Bill Clinton, explaining the reasons for the tests. That letter was also drafted, seen and approved by us. We left 5, RCR that day with a sense of having made history.

As expected, all hell broke loose after the world realised what India had done. Almost every major country in the world condemned India for the tests and imposed various forms of sanctions. An excerpt from the *New York Times* newspaper, following the tests had this to say:

> 'The Indian tests drew immediate condemnation from the Clinton Administration, which said the United States was "deeply disappointed" and was reviewing trade and financial sanctions against India under American nonproliferation laws; from other Western nations, including Britain, which voiced its "dismay" and Germany, which called the tests "a slap in the face" for 149 countries that have signed the treaty, and from Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary General, who issued a statement expressing his "deep regret." But perhaps the most significant reaction came from Pakistan, which raised fears that years of effort by the United States to prevent an unrestrained nuclear arms race on the subcontinent were on the verge of collapse. In the absence of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was visiting Central Asia, Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan hinted that Pakistan, which has had a covert nuclear weapons program since the early 1970s, would consider conducting a nuclear test of its own, its first. The tests came barely a week after India's Defense Minister, George Fernandes, warned that China, not Pakistan, is India's "potential enemy No. 1."'[10]

The World Bank also delayed a decision on over $850 million in loans to India, with the US using its clout with the Bank and the IMF to postpone decisions on the same.[11] One of 'the most substantive part of the US sanctions against India, at least in quantitative terms, relate[d] to the closure of credit lines for companies dealing with or in India. The bulk of such credit [was] directed through the Eximbank of the US and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC).'[12] Top-level strategy meetings were held in the PMO, almost every day, to discuss the developing situation and to dynamically plan our responses and contingency measures. Finance secretary Montek Singh Ahluwalia and revenue secretary NK

Singh generally accompanied me to these meetings.

The East Asian crisis had already added to our economic woes. The nuclear tests came as a double whammy. As a result of my experience of the balance of payments crisis of 1991, I had developed almost a pathological fear of another, similar crisis. We could face any situation on the domestic front, but it was the external dimension that worried me the most. I was also acutely aware of the fact that, after the tests, the doors of the international lending institutions had been closed for us. We were truly on our own in the wide, wide world. I presented my budget for 1998-99 on 1 June and came out with the Resurgent India Bonds in August that year. They turned out to be a great success, for they netted us over $4 billion, a good enough amount for us to tide over any shortfall as a result of the sources of foreign funds drying up. The Resurgent India Bonds dramatically changed the global perception in our favour as well.

We were determined to meet the challenge of sanctions head on. There was no question of succumbing to them or surrendering. When the sanctions started hurting the imposing countries themselves, more than India, and after our compulsion was explained to the sanctioning nations, they started withdrawing them one by one. On our part, we kept all our options open, including the one to decline further development assistance. Also, on 21 May, we had announced a moratorium on further nuclear testing, saying that our weapons were only for 'self defence', a week before Pakistan conducted its own n-tests on 28 May, followed by another one on 30 May.

On 8 June, the UN Security Council 'condemned the nuclear tests conducted by India and by Pakistan in May, demanded that those countries refrain from further nuclear tests and urged them to become parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) without delay and without conditions.'[13]

Meanwhile, something else was going on that was quite disturbing on another front, especially for me. Nusli Wadia of Bombay Dyeing was close to various BJP leaders and had decided to contribute his bit to governance almost immediately after the government assumed office. He even brought Kumar Bhattacharyya, a professor at Warwick University in the UK, to advise us. Apart from Vajpayee, the others who participated in these meetings at 7, RCR were LK Advani, George Fernandes, Jaswant Singh and I.

Naturally, since the economy was all-important, most of the issues discussed in these meetings concerned me. I did not like the tutorials on offer and my differences with Bhattacharyya would often spill out in the open. Mercifully, the meetings stopped after a while. Perhaps Wadia found something better to occupy his time.

Nusli Wadia was also instrumental in trying to form a group against Brajesh Mishra. He started convening meetings, generally at Advani's place, to discuss how Mishra's wings could be clipped, or how Vajpayee could even be persuaded to get rid of him. The others—all Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) members, —who attended these conspiratorial meetings, were George Fernandes and Jaswant Singh. I was a reluctant participant and had no interest in this conspiracy.

In any case, my plate was full with other pre-occupations concerning the economy, and I regarded these meetings as an imposition on my time. After a few of them, I told my Cabinet colleagues that nothing would come out of our confabulations, as Vajpayee had the fullest confidence in Mishra, and that there was no point in our continuing along this path. After that, they either stopped meeting or stopped inviting me to them altogether.

During this initial period as a Cabinet minister, I was not personally close to Vajpayee and only enjoyed a good working relationship with him. I went to him when I needed to, on official business, but I was not part of his inner circle or the cozy 'chat club'. During a trip to Ottawa in October 1998, where I had gone to attend the meeting of the Commonwealth Finance Ministers, Tarun Das, who was director general of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), asked me a very strange question. 'How often do you see the prime minister?'

'Whenever I need to, on official business,' was my honest reply.

'You should see him more often,' he said. His advice left me a little puzzled. Das was close to people in the PMO and I wondered what his intended message had been.

Both Montek Singh Ahluwalia and NK Singh were moved out of the Ministry of Finance after the end of the Budget Session in 1998. Montek moved to the Planning Commission as a member and NK joined the PMO as secretary under Brajesh Mishra. I was a little surprised at this decision. I had known NK for a long time and knew him well as a go-getter, but his elevation to the PMO was surprising. I had no doubt that Brajesh Mishra had played a key role in the transfer because Vajpayee had no reason to pick NK for the PMO.

In fact, soon after the transfer, I found myself in a car with Vajpayee. We had gone to Jaipur to attend a meeting of the BJP's National Executive. The PM asked me, quite casually, 'What kind of an officer is NK Singh?' I was taken aback. Was this a typical Vajpayee googly? I decided to play it safe and replied, 'He is a

brilliant officer and can get things done.' He probed further, 'Is he dependable?' Again, I played it safe and said 'Yes, he is loyal to whoever his boss is.' Thankfully, Vajpayee allowed the matter to rest there. To this day, I wonder why Vajpayee had discussed NK Singh with me after having appointed him to the PMO. I'm sure he had his reasons.

I stayed in the Ministry of Finance for a little over four years and presented five regular budgets and an interim one. It more than made up for the fact that in my earlier tenure in the ministry, as part of the Chandra Shekhar government, I could not even present one regular budget and had to be content with presenting only an interim one.

To date, I am the only non-Congress finance minister who has had the distinction of presenting five regular budgets and two interim budgets, and one of only seven since Independence to have done so.

This is not to say that I did not have my ups and downs in the finance ministry.

My first budget, presented on 1 June 1998, did not earn me any kudos, though it contained many good elements. Instead, two disasters struck me immediately. I had imposed a cess of one rupee per litre on petrol to finance the construction of national highways. The price of petrol should have gone up in proportion to this increase. I do not know how and why a misunderstanding took place at the official level between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Petroleum, but from the midnight of 1st June, the petroleum ministry raised the price of petrol by four rupees per litre.

People who went to petrol stations after midnight had to pay at the new rates. They howled, protested and cursed the government. Petroleum prices have always been extremely sensitive, politically. I was aghast when I learnt about this and asked my officers to correct the mistake, immediately after reaching the office.

However, the damage to my reputation had already been done for no fault of mine.

The second disaster was related to the increase in urea prices that I had proposed in the Budget. It was a sharp increase, no doubt – of one rupee per kilo, described in the budget speech to soften the blow. Though it was a deliberate decision taken jointly by Vajpayee and me, it did not go down well with the MPs, including from our own party. When I entered the Lok Sabha, I was greeted with howls of protest by almost the entire House and I felt completely cornered. Vajpayee was not present in the House and there was no time to consult him. Since I had to respond at once, I consulted Advani, who was present, and he encouraged me to announce a concession. So, I announced that the increase would be halved and be limited to 50 paise per kilo. The protests continued as members were not satisfied with this concession either.

These two setbacks were enough to adversely affect my professional reputation as finance minister adversely. The media started calling me 'Rollback Sinha', an appellation that would stick to me for years to come.

Another issue that did not go down well, especially with importers, was the imposition of a special additional duty (SAD) of 4 per cent on imports. Many described it as a 'Swadeshi Tax'. Though it was criticised then, it was still allowed to continue by all subsequent finance ministers and was abolished only recently with the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

The 1998 Budget was not appreciated by the media either. Magazines carried my photograph on the front page with unflattering descriptions of the Budget, which I found quite embarrassing. Often, while traveling by air, I would notice my photo on a magazine cover in a passenger's hand with the epithet 'Rollback Finance Minister'. Yet, what pained me the most was that other finance ministers before me had also rolled back many proposals announced in their budgets, but none had perhaps been criticised by the media as much as I was after the 1998 Budget.

Budget 1998 was also prepared against the backdrop of a dismal economic situation, both in India and the world. The East Asian crisis was raging in our backyard, and the region's economies were falling like ninepins. This was having a severe impact on the global economy as well. Our foreign exchange reserves were declining rapidly. Overall economic growth of GDP had decelerated significantly to 5 per cent in 1997-98 from 7.5 per cent in 1996-97. The fiscal deficit had reached 6.1 per cent of GDP as against the budget target of 4.5 per cent.

The nuclear tests and consequent economic sanctions had played havoc with business sentiment within and outside the country. In addition to that, the Voluntary Disclosure of Income Scheme (VDIS), introduced by P. Chidambaram earlier, had adversely impacted revenue collection. The implementation of the Fifth Central Pay Commission recommendations had also imposed an unbearable burden on government finances. In short, the situation was grim, and the Budget had been prepared keeping all these challenges in mind.

That the Budget was right for the situation prevailing in the country was proven later, as the growth rate of gross national income went up from 4.2 per cent in 1997-98 to 6.2 per cent in 1998-99 and to 8.8 per cent in 1999-2000. Compared to my 1998 Budget, my 1999 Budget was much better received.

BJP Redux

1999, however, turned out to be a tumultuous year in Indian politics, and for us in the BJP. The Congress party was up to its usual tricks. This time, they had a willing ally in Subramanian Swamy who conspired with Jayalalithaa to withdraw the AIADMK's support and bring down the BJP government. I had already presented my Budget on 28 February and was feeling good about the fact that it had been well received by all concerned. The first part of the Budget Session was already over. During the Parliament recess, I paid a visit to the Vaishno Devi shrine with my wife to seek divine blessings for the tasks ahead.

Jayalalithaa withdrew the support of her 18 MPs to the BJP government on 14 April 1999. It is debatable whether the government had come into a minority because of the withdrawal of her support. The Budget Session was on, where the government's strength on the floor of the Lok Sabha was likely to be on test practically every day, in any case. Since the defeat of a money bill in Lok Sabha would be tantamount to the passing of a no-confidence motion, our survival would have been questioned the moment such a bill failed to pass the test. But the President of India, KR Narayanan, felt otherwise and directed the government to seek a Vote of Confidence in the House.

Once the Budget Session resumed, 17 April 1999 was fixed for the vote. Both sides marshalled their forces for the floor test. On our side, we even brought the Rajmata of Gwalior in a wheelchair to vote in the House. The Congress party also brought its chief minister from Odisha, Giridhar Gamang, who had not yet resigned his Lok Sabha membership, to cast his vote.

The BJP was confident of winning the confidence vote because Mayawati was expected to vote in support of the government. But when I met Chandra Shekhar after reaching Parliament, he told me that we were going to lose, as Mayawati and her party had decided to vote against the government. I was surprised as this was not what we had been expecting. Obviously, Chandra Shekhar was better informed than we were.

Under high tension and great drama, we lost the vote of confidence by one vote —the narrowest margin in history. Before this, no government had lost a no-confidence motion by just one vote. Vajpayee resigned, but was asked by the president to stay until alternative arrangements could be made. Once again, the country was thrown into the vortex of political uncertainty, without its perpetrators having a care in the world about the economic consequences of their actions.

The moot question after the vote was regarding the fate of the Budget, presented as it was by a government that had subsequently lost its majority in the Lok Sabha. I was extremely unhappy both with the President of India for having forced a vote of confidence during the Budget Session, and with all those who had brought about the fall of the government. Thus, by this point, I did not care much about the Budget being passed or not, but President Narayanan was worried.

He called me for a discussion one day and I frankly told him that I was not in favour of a Vote on Account under the circumstances, and that the only way out was for Parliament to approve the entire Budget without discussion. I also told him that I would have brought some amendments to the Finance Bill based on representations I had received, but would have to forego that opportunity now.

Narayanan must have discussed the proposal with the Opposition and I can only presume they agreed to this course of action. The Budget was passed, without discussion, in both Houses of Parliament. Perhaps, it was the only occasion in our nation's history where an entire national budget, presented by a government that had lost its majority in Lok Sabha, was approved by Parliament without discussion. Incidentally, the recent budget of 2018-19 was also passed without discussion because of disruptions in the Houses of Parliament.

Sonia Gandhi tried her best to form an alternative government. However, thanks largely to Mulayam Singh Yadav's reluctance to lend support to her, she was unable to muster the required numbers. Ultimately, Narayanan had no option but to order the dissolution of the 12th Lok Sabha and call for fresh elections. The Election Commission scheduled the elections for September-October 1999, almost six months later.

Taking advantage of the political uncertainty in India, Pakistan attacked us in Kargil the following month, in May 1999. I had visited Leh, in J&K's Ladakh, in early April, and had stayed at an Army guesthouse there. During the visit, I had closely interacted with the top army officers posted there, and though the plan was to also visit Siachen, I could not do so because of inclement weather. None of us had any inkling then that the Pakistanis had infiltrated across the Line of Control (LoC) in Kargil. The news broke within weeks of my return from Leh.

While the Kargil conflict is a tale of treachery on the part of Pakistan, it is also a saga of political determination and strategic restraint, of unparalleled courage on the part of our jawans and officers and deft diplomatic moves by India that put Pakistan completely on the defensive. India won the Kargil War (May-July 1999) decisively, both in the field and diplomatically. We lost many good men—brave soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice in the face of heavy odds. It also imposed a heavy financial burden on our resources, even as we did not begrudge the expense when the country's safety and security mattered the most. Besides, I did

not impose a 'Kargil tax', as many people had feared—neither then, nor later.

The challenges that I faced in the finance ministry in 1998 and 1999 had left me with very little time to attend to my constituency in any meaningful way. I used to visit Hazaribagh but could not claim to have done any notable development work there. The rail connection between Koderma and Ranchi via Hazaribagh had, no doubt, been included in the Railway Budget of 1998 but even preliminary work on the project was yet to start. I had also been unable to attend to the smaller, local needs of the people by spending my MP Local Area Development (MPLAD) fund. In addition to this, the faction in the party that was opposed to me had seized upon this golden opportunity to prevent me from contesting the election. They did so by persuading the party leadership to deny me a ticket from Hazaribagh.

A meeting of the National Executive of the party was held in Delhi soon after the fall of the government. A colleague from Bihar told me that Kailashpati Mishra was going to Hazaribagh immediately after the meeting. I was surprised because he had not even mentioned this fact to me, so I asked him about it. His reply surprised me even more. He told me that he was indeed going to Hazaribagh. 'There are many *vishkopras* (poisonous lizards) there; they need to be tackled,' he explained.

I later learnt that my detractors had planned a meeting of the party workers in Hazaribagh in which they were going to pass a resolution to the effect that I had become unpopular in the constituency, was sure to lose the election and should be denied a ticket to contest. Kailashpati Mishra barged into the meeting uninvited and saved the day for me by persuading my detractors not to adopt such a resolution by convincing them that it was doomed to fail.

This group, which included the party president of the district, continued to oppose me throughout the election. I decided to visit the constituency more often after the elections were announced, especially the blocks from where I received an invitation to do so. The district president took umbrage at this and chastised me for not keeping him in the loop—a charge I countered by pointing out his unwillingness to help in arranging programmes for me in the first place.

The message was clear—he wanted me to lose the election. I had no choice but to fix my schedules and programmes through party workers who were loyal to the party and by ignoring the district president. People, especially women, thronged in large numbers to the meetings I held, and I enjoyed my interactions with them.

Our victory over Pakistan in the Kargil conflict, the way the government had been brought down, the nuclear tests, our decision to impose President's Rule in Bihar, my Budget and promise of a separate state of Jharkhand were all issues that we raised during the 1999 campaign to attract voters. It worked, and we were returned to power in Delhi. I won my own election by defeating the closest candidate by an even larger margin of over 1.82 lakh votes.

Delhi, as usual, and especially following a general election, was not without its little conspiracies. A rumour had spread that Karunanidhi—the head of the DMK, which was supporting our coalition—wanted Murasoli Maran as the finance minister, in lieu of his support to the government and that I would be moved out of the finance ministry. These rumours died down only when Karunanidhi himself made a statement that since I had won my election there was no need to replace me. However, this was not to be the end of my troubles.

At a meeting held in 7, RCR, in which only Vajpayee, Advani, some PMO officials and I were present, a proposal was mooted that the finance ministry be split into three separate ministries—expenditure, revenue and economic affairs. I was shocked beyond words. I told Vajpayee that if he did not have confidence in me, he should replace me but should not destroy the Ministry of Finance. Advani supported me fully.

The matter was left pending for the next meeting, in which I strongly opposed the proposal once again. Vajpayee finally agreed and the conspiracy to trifurcate the ministry and cut me down to size was shelved. I don't know who was behind this conspiracy but, once again, it showed that my path in the BJP and in the government was not always strewn with roses.

I returned to the finance ministry once again after the 1999 elections and started picking up the pieces. At one time during my previous tenure, it had looked like an alternate government would be formed under the leadership of the Congress. So, I had collected all my personal papers from the office, unsure whether I would ever return to it again.

Finally, I was back with greater confidence and self-assurance. My victory over my detractors, who wanted to cut me down to size by trifurcating the Ministry of Finance, had added to my confidence. As far as the economy was concerned, it was doing well, despite the Kargil conflict. The confidence of the investors had returned, both at home and abroad; the Resurgent India Bonds issued in August 1998 had been an enormous sucess, and foreign exchange reserves were once again on the rise.

An indication of my growing stature was that senior leaders of the BJP, who were ministers in the government, had started treating me with greater respect. Earlier, they would gently hint that I visit their offices for meetings. Some older staff members in my team pointed out that this was not done, and that ministers

who wanted to meet me should visit my office instead. Similarly, meetings in which I had to participate should be held in the finance ministry, they advised.

I told my office to follow this procedure. They did, and my colleagues easily fell in line. However, this did not apply to Advani, and Murli Manohar Joshi, who was the HRD Minister. Considering their seniority, I always offered to visit them for discussions or meetings. George Fernandes was extremely informal and insisted on dropping into my office if he had anything to discuss.

I also started meeting Vajpayee more often. There was always something important to discuss, and my personal rapport with him improved considerably. However, the transfers and postings of officials remained the exclusive preserve of the PMO, and Brajesh Mishra still called the shots. For some reason, frequent changes at the top levels in my ministry became a norm. For every Budget, I had a new team, which did cause problems. On most occasions, I would come to know about the transfers only after they had been announced.

My request for the posting of an officer of my choice in my ministry was rarely conceded. For example, I wanted NC Saxena as the finance secretary, but my request was not granted. On another occasion, I wanted Nripendra Mishra as the revenue secretary and, again, this was not agreed to. In fact, some officers were posted to my ministry despite my stated reservations against them. The Cabinet Committee on Appointments—consisting of the prime minister, the home minister and the minister in charge of the concerned ministry—invariably toed the PMO line.

For my part, I had no problem working with civil servants, having been one myself till only a few years ago. Unlike in 1991, when almost all the top officials in the finance ministry had been senior to me in the IAS, by 1998 I had no such issue as most serving officers were now my juniors in the civil service. Yet I gave them all the respect they deserved, and would often surprise them by walking into their rooms for a discussion.

Rakesh Mohan, a well-known economist, was a critic of mine. However, I did not allow this to come in the way of my choice of him as the chief economic advisor to the ministry. I was also very keen to have Harsh Vardhana Singh, a distinguished economist, in the ministry on a suitable post but government rules of recruitment prevented me from achieving that objective. However, I was able to bring Ajay Shah, another prominent economist, to the ministry in an advisory capacity. I had my eye on Raghuram Rajan as well, who had studied with my son Jayant at IIT-Delhi but could not find a suitable post for him at that time.

CHAPTER 22

BUDGET ROULETTE

My budgets of 1999, 2000 and 2001 were generally well received. Personally, I worked very hard in preparing them. I used to diligently take down notes during pre-Budget meetings with stakeholders, to which I kept adding new groups and people, like consumer organisations and editors of financial newspapers, respectively. In fact, I started this exercise every year with agriculturists. The media showed no interest in my meetings with them but when I invited industrialists and chambers of commerce representatives, the media photographers would fall over each other to take photographs. I remember the meetings with trade unions as being invariably combative. The unions were full of complaints and disapproved of any economic reform measures.

While preparing the Budget, I went through all the suggestions made by the various groups in these meetings, irrespective of their merit, and took a measured view on accepting or rejecting them. For example, the idea to encourage innovations, and set up a fund for this purpose, had come from a professor at IIM Ahmedabad and was included by me in one of my budgets. I used to meet my ministerial colleagues and domain experts personally to get their ideas on the Budget. I would also read newspaper articles containing suggestions for the Budget with avid interest.

I devoted a lot of time to my Budget speech. The draft of the speech was prepared by two officials: Part A by the chief economic advisor and Part B by the revenue secretary. Their style of writing was often quite different, and it was my job to synthesise the two parts and to ensure that the language and flow of the entire speech was consistent. I also had to ensure that it was of the right length, which would enable me to finish reading it in about 100 to 120 minutes. I made sure that in no case did it exceed two hours. Budget documents could not be brought home and official secrecy demanded they be handled only by authorised personnel even in office. Therefore, I worked on the Budget speech only in my North Block office after finishing the day's work and would often sit up till

midnight poring over it.

JS Mathur, who was first the joint – and later additional – secretary, budget, had a lot of work to do himself, and he was the officer to whom I handed over the draft speech after I was done with it for the day. But he wasn't the only one who kept me company. A big fat mouse used to live somewhere in or near my room. I noticed that, every day in the late hours, the creature would travel along the wooden cornice in the room, go somewhere and return to its place of rest after some time. I almost got used to this routine and would look expectantly in the direction the mouse travelled when the time came.

The monkeys in the North Block, however, were not so harmless. During holidays, most offices used to be empty even as we continued working out of ours. I had to be accompanied by a peon carrying a stick to keep the monkeys away whenever I went to another room for a meeting.

Because of the amount of attention that I paid to the Budget speech, I remembered the important passages almost by heart when I read it out in the Lok Sabha. Thus, I was surprised when, in 2004, Chidambaram claimed in his Budget speech that he had abolished the gift tax in 1997. This was wrong because I remember having abolished the gift tax in 1998. When challenged, Chidambaram claimed that it was a typographical error, which was clearly untrue. No finance minister would allow such a major typographical error to creep into the Budget speech without noticing it. A colleague of mine in the Lok Sabha filed a breach of privilege notice against him, and Chidambaram had to apologise for the mistake.

Talking of typographical errors, in the budget speech of 2018-19, Arun Jaitley, after mentioning the good work the government had done on 'the ease of doing business', talked about how the government was going to concentrate on the 'ease of leaving'. Obviously, he meant 'the ease of living', a favourite phrase of the prime minister! This happens only when the finance minister does not pay as much attention to the speech as required.

I used to adorn my Budget speeches with poetry from the famous Hindi poet, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, and prime minister Vajpayee, a poet of repute himself. I would often include couplets from Hindi film songs as well, for effect. This lent some spice to an otherwise dull affair. Like the one that was widely reported from my Budget 2001-02 speech: *Taqaazaa hai waqt kaa ke toofaan se joojho, kahaan tak chaloge kinaare.* (The times require you to fight the storms. How long will you keep walking on the shore?).

13 December 2001

I was serving as finance minister when the terrorist attack on Parliament took place on 13 December 2001, three months after the twin towers of the World Trade Centre had been brought down by terrorists in New York.

On that fateful day, I was not in Parliament but in my North Block office giving an interview to Sanjaya Baru, the then editor of *Financial Express*. We suddenly heard some gunfire and explosions and immediately rushed to the window to see what was happening outside. We could see as far as Vijay Chowk and did not notice anything untoward, but something was clearly wrong. Soon, we saw the movement of a mass of police vehicles. Our fears were confirmed when Pandey, the peon attached to me, burst into my room. 'Firing, sir! There's firing inside the Parliament building! Many have been killed!' he shouted.

Shocked, we stared at him in disbelief. He ran out again and returned a few minutes later. This time his voice was sombre as he informed us that one of my senior Cabinet colleagues had been killed in the attack. There was no way of verifying the rumours that were now flying thick and fast. I knew that there was no point in proceeding to Parliament to find out what was happening. It was a job for the law and order authorities. So, we switched on the TV to get more news. Baru left after a while and I continued to monitor the situation via television and telephone calls.

It was only later, after the all-clear had been given, that I went to Parliament and received a detailed account of what had happened from eye-witnesses there. The death of a Cabinet member turned out to be only a rumour as no ministers or legislators were hurt in the brazen attack. Sadly, seven security personnel laid down their lives in defending the temple of democracy. Five terrorists were also killed.

If disruption of Parliament had ever served a useful purpose it was on that day. The Opposition parties had been disrupting Parliament, with the result that it was being adjourned repeatedly. On 13 December too, Parliament had been adjourned for the day and many of the leaders were not present there at the time of the attack.

The temple of Indian democracy, the seat of its sovereign power, and almost the entire political leadership of India, was at the mercy of the terrorists that day. We were saved from utter destruction only because of the presence of mind and supreme sacrifice of our brave security forces. India did not bend before the terrorists; we resumed regular work in Parliament from the very next day. I also got busy with the preparation of the next budget.

My Budget of 2001 had been hailed as historic. It was immediately after this that the Tehelka episode hit the government and the party in March 2001. I have no doubt in my mind that it was a conspiracy of the enemies of the nation. Their aim was not only to destabilise the government but also cause irreparable damage to the country's economy and, thus, to the nation itself.

Based on my experience of 1991, if I was truly scared of anything it was a stock market crisis leading to a run on the foreign exchange market. Given the large foreign institutional investment in the stock market, this could cause a balance of payments crisis of the kind we had seen back in 1991. It was not an imaginary scenario, for we have seen such destabilisation efforts succeed in other countries as well.

It is the easiest thing for enemies of the nation to take the financial route to destabilise the country and get away without anyone even noticing it. I suppose the plan was to put the blame squarely on the finance minister for mismanaging the economy, putting my job in jeopardy, while they got away scot-free. Still, that would merely be collateral damage – the much bigger damage being to the country itself. Perhaps, this was the intention of those who were responsible for the Tehelka episode.

We were lucky to get away with only limited damage to the economy, apart from a lot of damage to my personal reputation that led to my finally moving away from the Ministry of Finance. The UTI crisis was the direct result of the Tehelka episode, because it led to a sharp fall in the stock market. My only regret is that it was not investigated as comprehensively as it should have been, to expose the conspiracy. Many well-known personalities would have also stood exposed had proper investigations been carried out.

The following year, my 2002 Budget had all the elements of a good one, but my cardinal sin was to impose a tax on dividends in the hands of its recipients—to be paid at the applicable income tax rates—rather than the usual ten per cent by the company. Some of the richest people in the country paid no tax because most of their income was from dividends as the rest were perquisites. I decided to tax both and incurred the wrath of these rich and powerful people.

Meanwhile, vested interests in the country, as well as my detractors within the party, had been actively giving me a bad name based on various unfounded allegations. Since there was no truth in any of their assertions, I was successful in warding off these baseless attacks. Over time, though, the allegations did create a

problem of perception, as Vajpayee put it.

I have no doubt that a powerful corporate house, which had reasons to be unhappy with me, and a couple of aspiring colleagues in the government, who wished to replace me, were responsible for the canards against me.

To survive and prosper in public life in our country, you need to cultivate powerful friends in business and media. Sometimes both are the same. I did nothing of the sort and led a lonely life in the Ministry of Finance, generally confining myself to my work. I had no social life as I had little time for it, and no time to go out of my way to cultivate the media or the owners of media houses. The result was that the credit for most of the good work I did was often appropriated by others and, conversely, the blame that I did not deserve was invariably placed at my doorstep.

This, along with the tax on dividends, perhaps provided a golden opportunity for my detractors to mount a campaign in the media about my being shifted out of the finance ministry.

Ultimately, Vajpayee buckled under their pressure and decided to move me to the external affairs ministry and bring Jaswant Singh to the Ministry of Finance. The aspiring colleagues who were responsible for spreading the rumours against me did not get my job either, and I finally moved to the ministry that had been my first love, in any case. I think it was Advani's intervention that saved the day for me.

I am recording this with a debt of gratitude to Advani because whenever I ran into a problem within the BJP, he would invariably come to my help.

The choice before me at that point of time was a stark one. I was clear in my mind about either being moved to the external affairs ministry or leaving the government altogether. I had already told both Vajpayee and Advani that I would not accept any other assignment in the government after the Ministry of Finance, except external affairs. Vajpayee initially appeared to be reluctant in making this choice, and it was at this stage that I went to Advani and asked him to intervene on my behalf. He did, and I was happy to move to external affairs.

In fact, after presenting the 2001 Budget, I had told both Brajesh Mishra and NK Singh that I would like to move out from the finance ministry to external affairs. However, Vajpayee had turned this proposal down by telling me, personally, that I was doing a good job in the finance ministry and should stay there.

My civil service background had taught me to remain anonymous. It was already an ingrained part of my nature when I joined politics, so I never went out of my way to seek personal publicity. Many people did tell me that I had to learn to 'manage the media in a changing world' but I was loath to do so. I considered it the

duty of the media to give me column space if I was news worthy. Why must I go out of my way to seek publicity?

I was wrong then; I suppose I am even more wrong today. When I was in the finance ministry, Vajpayee would often make me the head of groups of ministers (GoMs) appointed by him to deal with various issues. In his government, I headed the maximum number of such groups. Yet this did not make news or project me as a super minister.

Meetings of the GoMs would invariably be held in the Ministry of Finance. The media would be there at every meeting and ask me questions about what had transpired in them. Invariably, my reply was that these discussions were internal to the functioning of the government and a report would duly be submitted to the PM. My colleagues who participated in the meetings, however, would often disclose details of the discussions to the media, sometimes even claiming credit for my ideas in the bargain. I did not mind PM Vajpayee taking credit, since he was not only the head of the government but also our tallest leader. However, it hurt when others tried to misappropriate my ideas for themselves and that too unfairly and without deserving any credit for them.

The national highway project, for example, was entirely my idea. For me, it was not a new thought. I had nurtured it from the time I had been posted in Germany, in the 1970s a country famous, for its autobahns (a federal controlled-access highway system). I had resolved way back then that I would bring similar autobahns to India whenever I had the chance. I would have done it when I was finance minister in the Chandra Shekhar government, had I been allowed to present a regular Budget. In a resolution that was adopted by the SJP, at a convention held in Delhi after our government had demitted office, I had, indeed, included the idea of constructing such highways to criss-cross India.

When I got the opportunity again in 1998, in my very first regular Budget, I included the proposal to impose a cess of one rupee per litre on petrol for the construction of national highways. Later that year, Vajpayee was going to address the annual general meeting of FICCI. I happened to meet him a few days before that and remember him asking me about a big idea that he could talk about in the meeting. I immediately suggested the construction of national highways from North to South and East to West as the big idea that he could include in his speech.

Vajpayee did go on to make an announcement to this effect at a FICCI AGM in October in Delhi, comparing the criss-crossing network of national highways to the country's 'bhagyarekha' (the fate line, in palmistry). Much fun was made of the announcement, both by our political opponents and a section of the media.

Not one to be deterred, Vajpayee constituted an expert group headed by the then deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, KC Pant, to work out the

details. The group came up with the suggestion of a Golden Quadrilateral linking the four metros of Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai, looping back to Delhi, via a four-lane highway, either by upgrading the existing two-lane roads or by constructing new stretches wherever needed, as the first phase.

To give a further boost to the programme, I imposed a cess of one rupee per litre on diesel, as well, the following year. In subsequent years, we found other means of financing the programme. In course of time, this emerged as a flagship programme of the Vajpayee government, and full credit was given to the PM for launching it. I did not mind, nor did I ever claim it as entirely my idea.

The same is true of another famous scheme of the Vajpayee government, the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). As I have already mentioned earlier, elections for the 13th Lok Sabha were held in the months of September and October 1999. Election in my own constituency was held in September. The monsoon rains that continue to lash the eastern part of the country until October had made many rural roads impassable—a problem I encountered while campaigning in my constituency. Sometimes my vehicle would get stuck in the mud, much to the amusement of the villagers who took advantage of my plight to point out the condition in which they were being forced to live. I returned to Delhi after the elections, fully convinced that better roads in rural areas was a crying need.

I remember a meeting with Vajpayee quite vividly, in which KC Pant was also present. We were discussing the size of the gross budgetary support for the annual plan for 2000-01. It was in this meeting that I had suggested we start a new scheme for the construction of rural roads and earmark funds for it separately. I had even suggested that the programme be named the 'Atal Behari Vajpayee Gram Sadak Yojana'. Vajpayee accepted the idea but rejected the suggestion to name the scheme after him.

It was then that KC Pant suggested that it should be called the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) instead. The scheme was included under the head Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana, (PMGY) which included several schemes for the upliftment of rural areas. A lot of preparatory work was done before the PMGSY was finally launched because we did not want the scheme to go the way of many others that had failed to deliver the desired results. Ultimately, it was only in December 2000 that the scheme was formally launched by the prime minister, after tying up all the loose ends. An excerpt from my 2001-02 Budget speech is reproduced here:

> In my last Budget, I had announced the launching of a new scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana (PMGY) with the objective of undertaking time bound programmes to fulfill the critical needs of the rural people. As a follow up,

particularly with the objective of achieving rural connectivity, the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana has been launched by the Hon'ble Prime Minister on December 25, 2000. A Central allocation of Rs 2500 crore was provided for 2000-01. I am providing another allocation of Rs 2500 crore for the coming year. 50 per cent of the diesel cess is earmarked for development of rural roads.[14]

The resounding success of the rural roads scheme has led to many fake paternity claims. They are all wrong. Some of these 'fake fathers' may have been involved in the designing or implementation of the scheme, but the scheme itself was not conceived by them. But then, isn't politics a game of alternate realities?

Sometimes stories were also spread in the media, by various vested interests, that the Budget was being prepared in the PMO. Anyone who is familiar with the enormity of the Budget exercise would agree that it cannot be done anywhere else except in the Ministry of Finance. Ideas are discussed, no doubt, with the PM and any of his aides that he may choose to involve, but the Budget is put together only by the Ministry of Finance and very much in the Ministry of Finance.

Even in the face of all kinds of criticism and the poaching of credit by others, I continued my work in the ministry undaunted. I also continued to resist all kinds of pressure from corporates, political colleagues and even the PMO to do things that did not seem right to me or were not entirely in order. I even used to chastise my officials if they ever crossed the line. When the telecom industry was being extended relief, and operators were being allowed to shift from fixed-license fees to a revenue-sharing regime in July 1999, I had my reservations regarding the percentage of revenue share proposed by the Ministry of Telecom. I discussed the issue extensively with the officers in my ministry as well as the telecom ministry, especially its financial advisor.

Perhaps Brajesh Mishra came to know about the reservations I had, because he accosted me as I was entering the Cabinet room in South Block on the day the proposal was to come up before the Cabinet, and said, 'Yashwantji, don't oppose the telecom proposal.' I told him simply, 'Brajeshji, I shall do my duty.' In the meeting, I presented my case as reasonably and forcefully as I could.

Since the PM himself was holding the telecom portfolio, he could not be expected to reply to the points I had raised. Instead, the responsibility to do so fell on the shoulders of the telecom secretary, Anil Kumar. He did his duty, but his replies were hardly convincing as far as I was concerned. Yet, I was overruled, and the proposal was accepted by the Cabinet. There were some avoidable verbal duels as well between some of my Cabinet colleagues and me during the meeting, which left a bad taste in my mouth.

Years later, when a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) was appointed to enquire into the 2G scam under the UPA government, I became the staunchest

defender of the NDA government's decision within the Committee. My civil service training had taught me that my job was not only to express my views freely and fearlessly but also to stand by decisions taken, even if they were against my advice, if done in a legal and constitutional manner. I have followed this precept even in my political career.

So, two civil service traits—not seeking publicity for myself and wholeheartedly standing by decisions taken despite any earlier opposition—were so ingrained in my character that I could not shake them off even in my political career. These are virtues the civil service will do well to retain always.

Some of my colleagues in the party never could reconcile themselves to the fact that, as finance minister, I had perhaps been given the most important portfolio in the Vajpayee government. They considered me an outsider, an intruder even, and constantly conspired to undermine both my work and reputation. This group consisted largely of the younger and more ambitious lot of leaders in the party, all of whom aspired to become the PM after Vajpayee and Advani, labouring under the (mis)conception that the BJP would rule forever.

This often led to bitter internal party politics, examples of which are too many to recount.

Sushma Swaraj had been sent to the Union Territory of Delhi by the central leadership of the party as chief minister in October 1998, in the hope that she would help us win the general election. Since she had resigned from the Union Cabinet to take over as CM, she was left high and dry when we lost the election instead, and the Congress party emerged victorious, with Sheila Dixit taking over as the Delhi CM in December 1998. Swaraj was not immediately taken back as a minister in the central government and remained at a loose end for many months, following our defeat in the November 1998 Delhi elections.

She remained out of the Cabinet till she returned to the Rajya Sabha and was re-inducted as the minister for information and broadcasting in September 2000. During this period, she became a strident critic of the government. After presenting my budget of 2000-01 in February 2000, I was asked by the PM to brief party MPs about the budgetary provisions. Sushma Swaraj also turned up for the meeting and tried to ask some inconvenient questions, only to embarrass me.

A meeting of the National Executive of the party was held in Nagpur in August 2000. I had got myself admitted into Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for a small surgical procedure and was not planning to go to Nagpur for the meeting. The evening before the scheduled surgery, I received a call from Vajpayee who, after enquiring about my health, suggested that I should postpone the surgery and accompany him to Nagpur instead. Obviously, Vajpayee knew more than I did about what Sushma Swaraj was up to.

We travelled together in his plane and, upon reaching Nagpur, went straight to the meeting. I was told on arriving there that earlier in the day, when the economic resolution of the party had come up for discussion, Swaraj had made a speech that was highly critical of the government's economic policies. I immediately realised why Vajpayee had been keen for me to be present in Nagpur. The following day, I duly intervened in the debate and gave a suitable reply to Swaraj's criticism.

While Sushma Swaraj was at least open in her criticism of me, others did it clandestinely through their contacts in the media. Whenever I enquired from friends in the media about the adverse stories appearing against me in their newspaper or magazine, they would tell me that the stories had originated from within the party itself.

Soon, the name of the source was also revealed. The worst part was that everyone in the party knew about it but would plead helplessness in disciplining that person. Arun Shourie had once remarked that this gentleman enjoyed a mass base among four journalists in Delhi, which he used to such deadly effect that nobody—and absolutely nobody—had the courage to take him on. His clout has ended now because he has more than met his match in someone who controls the media like no one else has ever done before!

* * *

Disinvestment of the government's equity in PSUs had been first mentioned by me in my interim budget speech of March 1991. An excerpt from the speech is reproduced here.

> "It has been decided that Government would disinvest upto 20 per cent of its equity in selected public sector undertakings, in favour of mutual funds and financial or investment institutions in the public sector. This disinvestment, which would broad-base the equity, improve management and enhance the availability of resources for these enterprises, is also expected to yield Rs. 2,500 crores to the exchequer in 1991-92. The modalities and details of implementing this decision, which are being worked out, would be announced separately."[15]

This was almost apologetic. I picked up courage in my second stint in the finance ministry. Meanwhile, the idea was carried forward, somewhat tentatively and hesitatingly, by all subsequent governments. When I returned to the Ministry of Finance in 1998, I became bolder and in my very first budget speech of 1998 I announced that in most cases the government's equity in PSUs would be brought down to below 51 per cent. In subsequent budgets, I refined and re-defined this policy further. In fact, I had even used the word 'privatisation' in my Budget speech of 1999. In it, I had said that the 'Government's strategy towards public

sector enterprises will continue to encompass a judicious mix of strengthening strategic units, privatising non-strategic ones through gradual disinvestment or strategic sale and devising viable rehabilitation strategies for weak units.'[16]

I found a worthy colleague in Arun Shourie who started implementing our policy of PSU privatisation faithfully, honestly, efficiently and speedily. In doing this, he often ran afoul of the departmental ministers who were reluctant to give up their fiefdoms. In the meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Disinvestment, presided over by the PM, I would always side with Shourie. Many of my colleagues became critical of me for this very reason and tried their best to dissuade me from doing so. In fact, once a junior minister told me that the unit we were planning to sell was the only PSU in his charge and pleaded with me to save it from being privatised.

Some carry their ill will to this day. These people, among others, were only too happy at my departure from the finance ministry.

Among the many crises that I faced in the finance ministry, many were man-made, but some were natural and devastating like the October 1999 super cyclone in Odisha and the massive earthquake in Gujarat's Kutch in January 2001. Both created their own strains on the Budget. On both occasions, I spoke personally to the presidents of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to come forward and render special assistance to the affected states. For Kutch, I also extended special excise duty concessions to ensure the growth of industry there—a gesture that was appreciated by the people of Gujarat.

I was an accidental finance minister. If Chandra Shekhar had not put me in that ministry, I could have avoided the branding I got. Again, had Jaswant Singh become the finance minister in 1998, I would not have got to handle the finance ministry. But fate had obviously willed otherwise. At the end of it all, I can safely say, in retrospect, that I am proud of the years I spent in the Ministry of Finance and I am also proud of the branding I got. I've learnt to take it all in my side.

PART VI

BEYOND BORDERS: THE MEA YEARS

CHAPTER 23

‘SO, YOU HAVE FINALLY JOINED THE FOREIGN SERVICE!’

I was no stranger to foreign affairs or to diplomacy. My academic background, why so much gap? and international relations, stint in Germany as a diplomat, membership of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), and my external economic work in the finance ministry had equipped me suitably for the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). In addition, Vajpayee invariably used to include me as a member of his delegation on visits abroad, and I was happy to contribute meaningfully to discussions on economic issues at these meetings.

India’s profile abroad was on the rise during this period, and economic issues often formed an important part of the meetings’ agendas. I also used to participate in the meetings of the World Bank and the IMF and make significant contributions to the deliberations. So, when the World Bank was looking for a president for its Development Committee, the choice of its members fell unanimously on me. It was a unique honour as I became the first Indian finance minister to head this committee.

The G20, a group of important nations in the global economic system, was also formed during my time as finance minister. India was included in this group as a matter of right. Before that, the G7 or G8, with Russia in it, had already been in existence for many years but there was still a yawning gap in such a formation because the emerging economies were not a part of it.

So, the formation of the G20 filled that void and brought important developed and developing countries together. Many were still disappointed at not being included in it but there were others, including me, who felt that their inclusion would have made the group rather unwieldy. The Nordic countries were especially disappointed at their exclusion. Paul Martin, the then finance minister of Canada, became the first chairman of the Group. Its first meeting was held in Berlin in the Reichstag building. I succeeded Martin as its second chairman; but by the time a

meeting of the G20 was held in Delhi in the latter part of 2002, I had already moved to the MEA.

Gordon Brown, UK's Chancellor of the Exchequer, was the Chairman of the International Monetary and Finance committee of the IMF. The three of us—Martin, Brown and I—became a formidable group in international finance during that time. I remember Bimal Jalan, who was governor of the RBI then, once telling me in Washington that he had never seen India occupy as important a position in the meetings of global financial institutions as it did then.

In June 2000, I visited Rome with prime minister Vajpayee, as part of his five-day official visit to Italy and Portugal. Our delegation called on the Italian prime minister Giuliano Amato who had earlier been Italy's minister of the treasury. He instantly recognised me and wanted to revisit a point I had made in an intervention at an IMF meeting, which he said he was still a little intrigued about. I remember most of the discussion revolving around this issue.

My forays at the international level as finance minister had given me a solid grounding in global issues, which I used to great advantage as minister for external affairs.

Personally, I was happy to leave the finance ministry and move to external affairs. As I have mentioned earlier, it had been my first choice even in the Chandra Shekhar government. I only wish the impression had not been created that I was moved out of the finance ministry under a cloud.

Jaswant Singh had once told me, when he was the EAM, that the real work was in the Ministry of Finance, and the external affairs ministry was mere '*laffazi*' (a lot of empty talk). Yet I was enamoured of the MEA and the foreign service. In fact, had it not been for Ramaswamy Mani, I would have preferred to join the IFS rather than the IAS way back in 1960. In a nutshell, my first career choice, left to myself, would have been the Army, followed by the foreign service. The administrative service was actually my third choice. Ironically, opportunities did come my way to join the profession of my choice, but, for reasons I've already mentioned, I regretfully decided to give up on them.

When my nephew Dilip Sinha was appearing for the UPSC exam, I had suggested that he give the foreign service as his first preference. Many people had opposed the advice as Dilip was the only son of his parents. Yet he gave the IFS as his first preference and joined the service after successfully competing in the examination. I had also chosen an IFS officer, Ashok Kantha, to marry my only daughter Sharmila.

Mani Shankar Aiyar, who served for many years in the IFS and later joined the Congress party, made the most apt remark when he came to see me in the MEA immediately after I had taken over. He said, 'So, you have finally joined the

foreign service!'

In any case, I think Jaswant Singh fit the bill more suitably as external affairs minister because of his vast expertise in foreign and security affairs. In fact, Singh's only weakness was his marked tilt towards the United States. Vajpayee also had some reservations on this issue, even though he was in favour of improving relations with the US.

Here, I must mention that Vajpayee's understanding of foreign affairs was second to none. He also had the formidable Brajesh Mishra, who had spent a lifetime in the IFS—first as his principal secretary and later, in addition, as his national security advisor (NSA) spacing between words Being the foreign minister in his Cabinet, therefore, was not an easy task. Not only had Vajpayee himself been EAM before (in Morarji Desai's Cabinet), he continued to take an interest in foreign policy throughout his career and was a consummate diplomat.

Besides that, some of the important aspects of our relationship with countries like the US were managed directly by the NSA and the PMO. Military and security matters (including the nuclear issue) fell in this category, though Brajesh Mishra kept me personally informed of important developments on these issues. Foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal was also fully in the loop, and often led the Indian delegations at such talks, but I have no hesitation in admitting that we at the MEA played a secondary role in matters that were handled directly by the PMO. The US president and the Indian PM signed the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) in January 2004, which had been prepared by the PMO. I was aware of it but my contribution to it was marginal, at best, I have to admit.

Even after he demitted office as EAM in the late 1970s, and almost every year thereafter, Vajpayee used to be included in the Indian delegation to the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. In 1994, he was specially chosen by Narasimha Rao to head the Indian delegation to the annual meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) in Geneva where India was likely to face some tough questions, following the tabling of a resolution by Pakistan, via the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries), condemning human rights violations in J&K. Such was his stature and prowess when it came to handling delicate diplomatic situations and foreign affairs.

So, when I went to Vajpayee for advice after taking over the reins of the MEA, he told me that I should give greater attention to India's neighbours and should be cautious in my dealings with the US. It was an excellent piece of advice that I followed faithfully. Therefore, my first visit abroad was to the Maldives, our smallest neighbour. A special plane had been placed at my disposal to save time. After a successful visit to the Maldives, I proceeded to Sri Lanka for another interesting and fruitful visit. In later months, I visited Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan

and Afghanistan in quick succession.

CHAPTER 24

SOUTH ASIA

Gifts of Goodwill: Afghanistan

One of my most memorable trips, soon after taking over, was to Afghanistan in August 2002. For one, it was not merely a one-day 'flying visit'. I spent two nights at the Hotel Inter Continental in Kabul and visited important places like Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat and Kandahar. I had also taken two Boeing aircrafts with me, which had belonged to Indian Airlines, as a gift to the Government of Afghanistan. Mirwais Sadiq, the civil aviation minister of Afghanistan who received this gift, was later assassinated by the Taliban in Herat in March 2004. His father, Ismail Khan, was the governor of Herat at the time of my visit and had laid out the red carpet for me, in a reception befitting a visiting head of government.

During my visit to Herat, I specifically asked Ismail Khan what he would like India to do in his region. He told me that he would like us to complete the Salma Dam, which had been abandoned by the previous builder. I promised to do so without delay and made sure that an expert team from India visited the site immediately upon my return. The Salma Dam was completed by India in due course and was finally inaugurated in 2016. Much to my delight, it is now serving the needs of the people of Afghanistan.

The visit to Kandahar was a memorable one for different reasons. It was here that the hijackers had brought the Indian Airlines plane IC 814, which they had hijacked from Kathmandu, in December 1999.

The sight of Kandahar airport brought back all the unpleasant memories of those unhappy days of December 1999 when the country was trying to deal with the difficult problem of the highkacked Indian Airlines plane. The government was already on the back foot for having allowed the plane to fly away from the Amritsar airfield. Our pleas with Pakistan, when the plane landed on its territory,

went unheeded. And then finally it landed in Kandahar, right in the lap of the territory controlled by the Taliban. In Delhi and elsewhere, people were demanding that the hostages must be brought back, whatever the cost. There were daily demonstrations in front of the PM's residence. The Cabinet Committee on Security used to meet almost every day to take stock of the developing situation. Finally, for good or bad, a decision was taken to exchange the hostages for a few terrorists in our custody. Perhaps, even that may not have been as unacceptable as the external affairs minister Jaswant Singh going to Kandahar with the terrorists to personally hand them over to the Taliban. This issue was not discussed in the CCS; it was announced by Jaswant Singh himself as he entered the meeting room along with the prime minister as he generally did. Those present received it in complete silence; everyone assuming that he was doing so with the approval of the prime minister. But today is another day.

So it was here that Jaswant Singh, had landed to personally ensure the release of the aircraft and its passengers in lieu of the release of Pakistani terrorists, including Maulana Masood Azhar, from Indian jails. As the official successor of Jaswant Singh, I was visiting Kandahar in a completely changed context and in more pleasant circumstances.

I remember all of us excitedly peeking out of the plane's window as we landed at the airport. However, I was surprised to notice that, in marked contrast to the other places I had visited, there was no reception committee waiting for me. As the aircraft came to a stop, and we started alighting, only a few American soldiers who were in control of the airport came toward us, and that too out of curiosity.

It was only a little later that a big Afghan gentleman came almost running toward me, huffing and puffing, and introduced himself as the governor of Kandahar. 'Excellency, I am sorry to be late, but I was delayed because my men and I were bodily frisked by the American troops before being allowed to enter the airport. It took more time than I had anticipated, which is why I am late.' I was amazed to hear his story. It did not redound to the credit of the Americans to treat Afghan VIPs in this manner in their own land. It is incidents like these that have made them extremely unpopular in Afghanistan.

India and Indians, however, enjoy tremendous goodwill in Afghanistan—something I noticed wherever I went. I did my best to honour this. For example, Kandahar's economy is largely dependent on the dry fruits grown in the area. I offered a preferential trade arrangement for the import of these items into India, which made my hosts happy. A testament to the same goodwill was my visit to Mazar-e-Sharif, where a large crowd had assembled outside the shrine and was cheering for me. I not only offered a 'chadar' at the Mazar, I also made a financial contribution on behalf of the Government of India for its upkeep.

My visit to the Habibia School in Kabul was notable as well. It is the most famous school in Afghanistan and most of the nation's leaders have studied there. Though the school building had been severely damaged during the war, its students assembled in large numbers to welcome me and even put up a cultural show in my honour. In my speech, I told them that the visit reminded me of schools in my constituency where I received a similarly warm welcome and promised the Government of India's help in getting its buildings fully restored, which we successfully did.

By then, India had emerged as the second-largest donor of development aid to Afghanistan. We directed the aid not only for people's welfare but also for strengthening the nation's economy. My visit was an important landmark toward that effort. Later, I told Arun Singh, who was the joint secretary in MEA looking after Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, to offer a proposal via our Ambassador in Afghanistan to construct their parliament building. The Afghan government accepted our offer, and we constructed the building, which was inaugurated in December 2015.

It is particularly gratifying for me to note that India now lists the Salma Dam and the Parliament building as the two shining examples of its assistance to Afghanistan. I feel it is important that our special relationship with Afghanistan continue to flourish and we do all that we can to help the country and its people. We must also work with friendly countries to ensure that Pakistan does not create mischief there, that peace is maintained, and the country progresses in all areas, including cricket.

Comfortable Co-existence: Nepal

I travelled to Nepal to attend the SAARC foreign ministers meeting in August 2002, soon after taking over at the MEA. I was familiar with Nepal and had visited the country on many occasions in the past. Thanks to Chandra Shekhar's special relationship with the Nepalese leadership, I also knew almost all their leaders personally.

Chandra Shekhar had played a very important role in the restoration of democracy in Nepal and I had visited Kathmandu with him before he became PM.

Since meetings in public places were banned by the monarchy at the time of Chandra Shekhar's visit, the workers and leaders of the Nepali Congress had met at the home of Ganesh Man Singh, one of the country's tallest leaders. In fact, the Nepalese people had not forgotten Chandra Shekhar's contribution toward their struggle for democracy and had given him a hero's welcome when he visited Nepal as prime minister in February 1991.

I was also quite at home in dealing with the leaders of Nepal, cutting across political parties.

In fact, the informality that marked my relationship with the Nepalese leadership can be gauged from an incident from one of my visits to Kathmandu during the early nineties, when GP Koirala was the country's prime minister. My friend Dayanand Sahay, MP, had to visit Kathmandu for some business-related work. He requested me to accompany him and offered to pay for my air travel and hotel stay. I agreed on one condition that, while he was on a business trip, for me it was purely a holiday and he would not ask me to accompany him to his meetings. He agreed, and we travelled together to Kathmandu.

On the second day of our visit, as we were returning to our hotel from the city, we ran into a gentleman called Jha, who was secretary of the India-Nepal Friendship Association. We both knew him well as he was from Patna. He was absolutely thrilled to see us and informed us that a meeting of the association was going to be held at the same hotel shortly, in which the PM of Nepal, Girija Prasad Koirala, and the Indian ambassador, Bimal Prasad, would both be present. He strongly urged us to attend, but we made our excuses and retired to our respective rooms. I had no desire to disclose the fact of my presence in Kathmandu at that stage because I was aware that those who knew me well would complain about not being informed of my visit. But that is exactly what happened.

A little while later, I heard a knock at my door and was surprised to see Bimal Prasad standing outside my room. He told me that he had learnt about my visit from Jha and had come to complain as I had not informed him of my presence in the city. 'What will I tell Baby?' he asked. Bimal Prasad was married to Baby, the daughter of Thakur Prasad who had been our neighbour in Kadamkuan in Patna, and had been responsible for my admission to the Patna Collegiate School. The two families were on very friendly terms and Bimal Prasad was quite justified in his complaint. I offered some lame excuse and promised to visit them the next time I was in the city. He left after this assurance.

Even as I was recovering from this surprise encounter, there was another knock at my door. When I opened it, I was in for an even bigger shock. At the door was none other than GP Koirala, the then prime minister of Nepal himself. He had come with the same grievance that I had not cared to inform him of my visit. I

offered the same excuse and promised to make up for it the next time. Not to be dissuaded, he left only after making me promise that I would see him before I left Kathmandu, which I duly did.

My August 2002 visit to Nepal as the EAM of India was a different affair altogether. It created a lot of interest in the media because Pakistan was also participating in the foreign ministers' meeting. Speculation was rife about whether I would even shake hands with the Pakistani representative—former foreign secretary Inam ul-Haq, who had become the country's minister of state for foreign affairs. The media followed us wherever we went. On one occasion, he and I happened to come face to face with each other.

I told him, '*Janaab, haath to mila liya jaye, taki duniya yeh na soche ke hum* common courtesy *bhi nahin jaante*.' (Let us shake hands, at least, so that the world does not think that we don't even know common courtesy.) We shook hands warmly but, given the state of our relationship, there was no question of a dialogue with him. I also used the opportunity provided by this visit to meet with all the Nepalese leaders, both within the government and outside it.

I also met King Gyanendra during this visit. We had a very long meeting that lasted over an hour. I remember explaining various developments to him in detail, as we in India saw them, and warned him that if he did not show political maturity and get the general elections conducted, the monarchy itself would come under threat. He listened to me patiently, but I could see that he was far from convinced.

I similarly advised the then prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, that he should not postpone the elections, which were due later that year, because of the law and order problem created by the Maoists. I mentioned many examples from India, where elections had been held on a staggered basis and in phases, in states that faced similar law and order problems. Deuba did not take this advice seriously and the elections were postponed. What followed was eminently avoidable. Deuba was allowed to continue as prime minister for some time by the King but was dismissed in October 2002 and King Gyanendra assumed the reins of government directly. His rule made him immensely unpopular, ultimately leading to the end of the monarchical system in Nepal.

As the case of Nepal shows, the road to democracy has been a long and arduous one for the countries in the region, a quest that the citizens of many of these nations continue to bravely fight for and defend. For others, their struggle for peace has involved prolonged internal strife – like in Sri Lanka.

Bridging the Distance: Sri Lanka

Among all our neighbours, I was most comfortable dealing with Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan leaders had no hang ups, did not accuse India of behaving like a 'big brother', were always willing to cooperate and understand our point of view and were interested in maintaining cordial relations with India. Those were tough times for them because they were fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgency in the North.

India's position on the same had been clearly articulated from time to time. We were not in favour of a separate Tamil nation. At the same time, we wanted adequate devolution of powers to the provinces so that people there could largely manage their own affairs. We were also in favour of peace and a negotiated settlement of the Tamil minority issue and were completely against violence, and against any settlement imposed from the outside. We also wanted the Sri Lankans to work it out for themselves.

Thus, we were happy when the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE decided to come to the negotiating table in the early 2000s to discuss a settlement and fully backed the move for a dialogue that was being brokered by Norway. However, this also created a delicate and tricky situation for India because we had banned the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and could not sit at the same table with them. So, we did not directly take part in any of the negotiations.

However, I must place on record my appreciation for the approach adopted by the Sri Lankan government. They kept us fully informed of the progress of the negotiations, not only through diplomatic channels but also by sending special emissaries to Delhi every so often. They also gave a lot of weight to our suggestions. It is regrettable that no settlement could be arrived at, even after many rounds of negotiations, and the issue ultimately had to be resolved by the use of force.

On our part, we had learnt our lesson from Rajiv Gandhi's misadventure of sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka and were, therefore, strictly against any direct military intervention. Yet, when the LTTE seized an Indian fishing boat, I did not hesitate to send them a stern message: that if the boat was not released within a stipulated time frame, they would have to face dire consequences. This had the desired effect and the fishing boat was released.

We already had a free trade agreement with Sri Lanka and were in the process of negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with them. I noticed that the Sri Lankans were quite willing to completely integrate their economy with India's. Of course, this would have given them access to our huge

market but its benefits for India, political and economic, would also have been considerable. It is a pity that the matter is still pending.

The Sri Lankans were also keen to have a bridge across the Palk Straits, which did not happen because of the reservations of some people in Tamil Nadu, especially Jayalalithaa. Someday, I hope it will be possible to build a bridge between the two countries, without damaging the Ram Setu, for us to get connected by a land route, and reap the benefits of regional integration to the maximum extent.

Let me now turn to some of our other neighbours.

Friends to the East: Myanmar and Bhutan

I regret not visiting Myanmar during my tenure in government. Perhaps, no appropriate occasion came my way for such a visit. But I must mention an interaction I had with the Myanmar foreign minister that took place on the sidelines of an ASEAN conference. Myanmar had been under military rule and some countries, especially the US, treated it as a pariah.

The Myanmarese were under tremendous pressure from the international community to release Aung Sang Suu Kyi from prison and to restore democracy. Even we were lukewarm toward that country during this phase. However, the Chinese had no such reservations and had started playing an increasingly important role in its development, spreading their tentacles all over the place.

The foreign minister of Myanmar was making exactly this point to me and urging me not to throw the field so completely open for the Chinese in his country. But as he was making this point, he kept looking at the door repeatedly and apprehensively to see whether somebody else was listening to this sensitive conversation. Such was the fear of the Chinese. We gradually changed our policy toward Myanmar and decided to get involved in its development, without any reservations, and continued to use our clout with the Myanmarese leadership to also promote democracy in the country and the release of Aung Sang Suu Kyi.

The West, especially the US and UK, clearly followed double standards on the question of democracy. While they felt strongly about military rule in Myanmar, they had no such compunction in the case of Pakistan where General Musharraf

had taken control. I remember coming face-to-face with these double standards during a visit to London. The high commissioner of India had organised a lunch for me at The Residence to meet with some leading British MPs. After a while, the discussion expectedly turned to the prevailing tension between India and Pakistan.

When I raised the issue of how the General had extinguished democracy in Pakistan, I was surprised to find support for him among many of the MPs present. They told me that the democratic rulers of the country were thoroughly corrupt, and that Musharraf was at least providing a clean government. I was absolutely shocked at the brazen reply and could not help asking, 'In that case, would you welcome military rule in your country if the democratically-elected government turned corrupt? The answer to such a development is more democracy, not less, my friends.' They were not amused by my comment.

The key point here is that many in the West believe that democracy is a luxury that only they can afford, not the poor, deprived and illiterate countries of the 'Third World'. Besides, it appears to be something that only they can decide, when it comes to countries that qualify for it.

Bhutan

Bhutan was another neighbour with whom our relationship had always been extremely cordial. However, a problem did arise when we started taking strict action against the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and other terrorist groups in the North-East. When we chased them in our territory, they would cross over into Bhutan to escape the Indian security forces. Over time, they also set up bases in Bhutanese territory and mounted attacks on us from there. This could not be allowed to continue. The matter was discussed in the CCS and it was decided that I should visit Bhutan to take up the issue with the country's king.

Accordingly, I paid a visit to the country to discuss the issue with the then monarch, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. I remember the very warm reception accorded to me in Bhutan, where the royal band received me with much fanfare as I arrived at the King's Palace. I was received by the king in a special room and remember climbing many flights of stairs to get there. When I explained the ULFA situation to him, he immediately agreed to our proposal to take military action

against them.

The operation had to be carried out by the Bhutanese Army and, despite my protests, the king offered to lead it personally. The plan was executed after due preparation, ULFA was evicted from Bhutan and its camps destroyed. The king had kept his word and led the entire operation from the front.

However, my experience with some of the other neighbouring countries were not quite as smooth. Bangladesh is one such example.

Bangladesh

I had already had some interesting experiences while dealing with Bangladesh, which I had visited on at least two earlier occasions when I was joint secretary in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport and dealing with inland water transport. We had an important riverine navigational route from Howrah to Assam via Bangladesh. The Central Inland Water Transport Corporation of India, a PSU, used to run cargo services between the two places, and India had a bilateral agreement with Bangladesh to facilitate this navigation. The Bangladeshis could be difficult during the talks.

I have already mentioned earlier, how, during one such visit, the Bangladeshi delegation was being so difficult that I had decided to wind up the negotiations and return to India. The day was saved only because of the strong intervention of Muchkund Dubey, our high commissioner in Dhaka at the time. I remembered this earlier experience well when I became the EAM.

Morshed Khan was the foreign minister of Bangladesh. I had met him for the first time during the meeting of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue in Thailand in June 2002, which I had attended as finance minister. Morshed was all over the place as the self-appointed master of ceremonies. However, he and I became quite friendly when I moved to external affairs. Yet, the negotiating style of Bangladesh remained the same as what I had experienced long ago as a joint secretary.

When I paid a visit to Dhaka for bilateral talks, we had very cordial discussions but when it came to the joint statement, the Bangladeshi delegation went back on the understanding we had arrived at regarding an important issue during the talks. It not only changed its position but insisted on sticking to it despite our

protestations. When the matter was reported to me, I gave strict instructions to our negotiators not to budge. They did what I had asked them to do, and the negotiations collapsed. I even told my delegation to keep our special aircraft ready. We would leave Dhaka without a joint statement.

When Morshed Khan learnt about it he came rushing to my hotel room. I told him frankly that I was leaving since an agreement was not in sight. He rushed right back to his delegation, they accepted our formulation and we delayed our departure to issue the joint statement, returning to India fully satisfied. This was an exact repeat of what had happened earlier when I had gone to Bangladesh as joint secretary many years ago.

Standing your ground can be tough sometimes and is a specially difficult balance to strike when it comes to international diplomacy. It has its rewards, tough as the choices often may any specific incident comes to mind here.

One day, we received news that some members of a nomadic tribe were trapped in the no man's zone between India and Bangladesh because our security forces would not allow them to enter India illegally. They had obviously been pushed by the Bangladeshi security forces toward the Indian border. In my mind, I was very clear that since they were not our citizens they could not be allowed into India and had to go back to Bangladesh. The Bangladeshis were claiming that they were not Bangladeshis and, thus, could not be allowed into their country either.

The stalemate continued for a few days. The high commissioner of Bangladesh came to see me one day and told me that Morshed Khan was keen to visit Delhi to settle the matter. I told him that the foreign minister was most welcome but should visit only after the nomads' issue had been resolved.

Given our firm stand, the nomads vanished into thin air one night and the problem was resolved. Since we had not allowed them into India, Bangladesh obviously thought it wise to take them back. Morshed Khan did come to India after the incident, but only to discuss other issues.

Dealing with India's neighbours took tact, patience and a generous helping of soft diplomacy. Often, it required taking a tough stance, in the face of intense global and domestic scrutiny. This was nowhere truer than it was in our dealings with Pakistan.

CHAPTER 25

DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF: DEALING WITH PAKISTAN

When I took over at the MEA in July 2002, our relationship with Pakistan was at its nadir. The Indian Army had been mobilised in strength at the Indo-Pak border and along the Line of Control (LoC), under Operation Parakram, following the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. Pakistan had responded by similarly mobilising its troops. The armies of the two countries were in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation along the entire border and the LoC.

This confrontation between two nuclear-armed neighbours was fraught with danger, and even the slightest provocation or accident could start a war. Pakistan was not only exporting terror to India but also complaining to the rest of the world about the situation in the subcontinent, while putting all the blame on India. The world was watching the situation with concern, everyone's greatest fear being a military conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbours leading to a nuclear conflagration. Pakistan did not miss any opportunity to embarrass India at global fora.

As soon as I took over, I started getting telephone calls from the foreign ministers of various countries, who not only expressed their apprehensions but also wished to visit New Delhi. The list included the then US secretary of state, Colin Powell, and the British foreign secretary, Jack Straw. I generally discouraged such visits, but I was hard-pressed to ignore some of the more insistent requests.

The first important visitor in this unavoidable series of visits was Colin Powell, soon after I took over and in July itself. I received him in Hyderabad House where we had a free and frank discussion. I informed him that though India had no desire to go to war with Pakistan, we would not tolerate cross-border terrorism and its sponsorship by Pakistan. The excuses offered by Pakistan were flimsy, I said, and did not stand up to scrutiny. Nor was the 'non-state actors' theory offered by Pakistan acceptable to India. I added that Pakistan had been carrying on with this

charade since 1947 when it had attacked Jammu and Kashmir through the so-called 'tribesmen', the then non-state actors.

I also told him how Pakistan had been recruiting, motivating, training, financing, arming and launching terrorists from its soil to attack India. On our part, we had full knowledge of the terrorist training camps in Pakistan and in Pak-Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Besides, after the Kargil War of 1999, it had become difficult for terrorists to cross the LoC from Pakistan without the active support of the Pakistani Army.

In this light, I added, 'There exists in Pakistan a complete infrastructure of terror of which the last point is the terror tap at the LoC. We cannot look at the infiltration of terrorists from Pakistan in isolation. We have to look at the whole infrastructure of terror that exists in Pakistan, starting with the reservoir where it all started and the pipeline through which it is transported to India.'

I also said that we had no desire to use nuclear weapons against Pakistan, as we were already committed to a 'no first use' policy. However, in case Pakistan indulged in a nuclear misadventure, I made it clear that it would receive a befitting reply from us.

Colin Powell showed an understanding of our position but the US attitude then, as well as now, has never been to look at the merits of the situation but to prevent a conflagration between India and Pakistan at any cost. Treating India and Pakistan at par, and ignoring the sins of the latter, has been the hallmark of US policy. Its only concern has been that Pakistan should not export terror to Afghanistan where it hurts US interests directly. As far as India is concerned, the US expects us to either deal with it ourselves or learn to live with it. Even now when the US is making so much noise about Pakistan being the epicentre of terror, its concern is more about Afghanistan than India.

I handled Jack Straw's visit in a similar fashion. The Americans and the British were clearly acting in tandem and Straw was fully aware of my discussions with Powell. His concern was also to avoid a nuclear war somehow. I remember telling him that even I had no idea where I would take shelter, in case Pakistan dropped a nuclear bomb on Delhi! That said, I told him not worry too much about the use of nuclear weapons in case hostilities were to break out between the two countries.

In fact, one of the reasons for the special concern shown by the US and UK was the warning I had conveyed to their ambassador and high commissioner, respectively, soon after taking over as EAM. On 13 July 2002 a group of heavily armed terrorists attacked the Hindu-dominated area of Qasim Nagar in Jammu, killing twenty-nine people and injuring many more. The hand of Pakistan was as clear as daylight in this dastardly night-time attack.

A meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security took place immediately after

this attack in which it was decided that any further provocation from Pakistan should lead to military action, irrespective of the consequences. I was given the responsibility of calling the US ambassador and the UK High Commissioner to forewarn them about our intent. I jointly summoned the two diplomats and conveyed the warning to them in the most straightforward language possible.

They must have taken our warning seriously, which may explain the flurry of visits by their foreign ministers to India. They also visited Pakistan and must have conveyed our warning to the Pakistanis. J&K was due to go to polls and one of our warnings was that Pakistan should be told not to disturb the elections in that state. But Pakistan being Pakistan, such advice must have fallen on deaf ears because violence against political persons continued unabated in J&K. The elections were, however, conducted successfully and we earned praise from the global community for conducting a free and fair election in the state after a long time.

The visit by foreign ministers from many friendly countries continued, however, including more visits by Powell. Their advice was that we should start a dialogue with Pakistan to ease the tension. The heads of governments of many of these countries were also talking to Vajpayee along the same lines. We had already earned the plaudits of the international community for the successful conduct of elections in J&K. Our democratic credentials were beyond reproach. Our economy was doing well. India's global standing had reached a new high and we had to demonstrate to the world that we were a responsible nuclear power.

It was against this backdrop that Vajpayee came out with his famous 'hand of friendship' offer to Pakistan. During a visit to Srinagar he made the offer of peace to Pakistan at a public meeting on 18 April 2003. I was not privy to his line of thinking and the announcement came as a huge surprise to me personally, but Vajpayee's wisdom could not be questioned. Gradually, we started to withdraw our forces from the Pakistan border and the LoC. Pakistan followed this example and the tension started to dissipate gradually. But we did not rush into announcing the other steps to improve the relationship. It came slowly.

In the MEA, we prepared a list of steps that India could even announce unilaterally to ease the tension. It was put up for approval by the CCS only on 22 October 2003 and I made the announcement in a press conference later that day.

Pakistan reciprocated equally, even suggesting a ceasefire in Siachen. This offered us a golden opportunity to demarcate the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Siachen, which, in a way, was the extension of the LoC, and brought some clarity to an otherwise (highly) contentious issue. The ceasefire along the LoC and the AGPL in Siachen has saved both countries thousands of crores of rupees. It is a pity that even this understanding is now being violated with impunity by Pakistan.

I must admit here that I was shocked to find that some of the other foreign ministers who visited India during this period were often completely uninformed or ill-informed about the history of India and Pakistan, as well as the geography of Jammu and Kashmir. I often had to conceal my exasperation with such visitors and spend a lot of time in educating them. To one such visitor, who was also the head of his government, I even presented a copy of C. Dasgupta's book on the J&K issue—*War and Diplomacy in Kashmir, 1947-48* and advised him to at least read the portions I had highlighted for his benefit.

Still, while some could plead ignorance, others—deliberately intent on creating trouble, and despite being well-informed about our troubled history—were often more intransigent and difficult to deal with.

The first major test of my diplomatic skills came during the meeting of the 9th Asian Regional Forum (ARF) in Brunei at the end of July 2002, soon after I had taken over at the MEA. Pakistan was not a member of the Forum, yet its friends in ASEAN were planning to include a reference to the tension between India and Pakistan in the final statement, which was not acceptable to us. Had such a statement been adopted, it would surely have reflected poorly on me, so I took up the challenge head on.

I told the officials of the MEA, led by Sheel Kant Sharma, that they should firmly reject any suggestion of bringing up a bilateral issue (like that between India and Pakistan) in a multilateral forum. I asked them to clearly tell the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) friends of Pakistan in the Forum, that any such initiative on their part would adversely affect India's bilateral relationship with them. While they worked diligently at their level, I also swung into action immediately after my arrival in Brunei, holding several bilateral meetings with my foreign counterparts in which I conveyed the very same message. I heaved a huge sigh of relief when we succeeded in our mission to prevent any such mention from being included in the final statement issued by the ARF after the meeting.

However, the Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan tried to be difficult. When it was his turn to make a statement, he referred to the tension between India and Pakistan. I intervened and told my Chinese counterpart that the reference was as unacceptable to me as any reference to the bilateral issues between China and Taiwan would be to him. A few months earlier, as well, the same minister had made a similar mention at a meeting organised by the prime minister of Thailand

under the name Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD). I was not EAM at that time, but Vajpayee had sent me to attend that meeting in June 2002, hoping that it would have a larger economic agenda. In that meeting as well, I had to firmly rein in the same Chinese minister. Obviously, he was a slow learner.

I was happy when he lost his job, as his successor was at least more gracious. The same, of course, could not be said of the leaders of many of our intransigent neighbours, as future incidents, especially at multilateral forums, would show. Pakistan would jump at any chance to embarrass us at global gatherings. So, even though many of these meetings proved extremely fruitful for me to build new relationships and strengthen old bonds, Pakistan would often play spoilsport. One such occasion was the high-profile meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York. In fact, I soon realised that in multilateral meetings where Pakistan was also present, such unpleasant situations were unavoidable. Pakistan would, as a matter of habit, raise bilateral issues which generally meant Jammu and Kashmir.

The same was true of the media as well, whether at home or abroad. The media would be interested only in our relationship with Pakistan, much to my annoyance. There was so much more to talk about. KP Nayar summed this up, in an article in *The Telegraph* (4 October 2003), when he wrote:

> 'The external affairs minister, Yashwant Sinha, said with some sadness before his departure from New York – where he stayed on after prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee flew home – that the India-Pakistan spat in the general assembly and outside eclipsed everything else that the Indian delegation did in New York. He was right. An event of potentially huge significance during Vajpayee's week-long stay in New York was a summit meeting which received very little attention in India because of the heated exchanges between India and Pakistan.'

Many of my media interactions are important in their own way, and perhaps still relevant, but I would especially like to refer to an interview I gave to Tim Sebastian of the BBC on 25 November 2002, where most of the questions related to the India-Pakistan relationship. Sebastian was trying to corner me by saying that Pakistan had significantly brought down the incidents of cross-border terrorism, while questioning my 'reluctance' to accept this. I continued reiterating that the Pakistanis had done very little to stop the infiltration of terrorists into India, while stressing that terrorism must stop altogether. He persisted in making the point that incidents of terrorism had gone down and that we should start talking to Pakistan.

This was my reply, in effect, to one of his questions:

> 'What is the assurance that Musharraf gave to the international community? The assurance that he gave was that he would put a permanent stop to infiltration. This was in the first week of June and now if it has gone down by 50 or 60 per cent, do you think that is good enough? If 100 people were getting killed in a day, will you say that we should be satisfied because now only 50 people are getting killed? ...If one of the two towers in New York had not gone down, would you have said that we should be happy because only one had gone down? ...You don't talk to a fellow who has a gun to your temple and say that since he has removed it by six inches, now you will start talking…The fundamental mistake that you are making is in thinking that if infiltration and cross-border terrorism are down by 50 percent it is good enough. It is not. It must go down 100 per cent. Terrorism has to stop.'

This was my consistent position as minister for external affairs, namely, that cross-border terrorism had to stop completely before India and Pakistan could resume dialogue in any form. This is not only what I told Tim Sebastian in 2002, but what I reiterated to all the foreign ministers I met and what I said to all the other foreign media channels with whom I interacted during my tenure as EAM. I am happy to say that this is the Indian stand that emerged from the joint press statement issued in Islamabad on 6 January 2004, especially the way it was modified by Vajpayee himself.

It was also the BJP's position, consistently, even in Opposition throughout the ten-year rule of the UPA, a position from which the NDA Government departed after coming to power in 2014. It appears to have come to the same conclusion now, based on its own experience, and this is where the problem at our end is. Every prime minister imagines that he is more capable than others to solve the problems with Pakistan, ignores the historical experience and follows the same beaten path, all over again, only to realise at the end of it all that it is not as easy as he had imagined.

I am firmly of the view that as long as Pakistan continues to export terrorism to India from across the border, a dialogue will serve no useful purpose. For every point that India will make, Pakistan will be ready with two counter points. It will be a dialogue of the deaf.

I must also mention here a visit to India by the then foreign minister of Pakistan, Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, during UPA rule, in early 2007, where he expressed a desire to call on Vajpayee. Vajpayee agreed to meet him at his residence and asked Brajesh Mishra and me to be present. I remember the meeting very well. After an exchange of pleasantries, Kasuri launched into a long speech in which he praised Vajpayee as the statesman who had brought about a qualitative change in the relationship between India and Pakistan. He then talked about how

the UPA government in India and the Musharraf government in Pakistan were trying to take this forward.

The main purpose of his speech was to secure the BJP's support for the so-called peace initiatives of the two governments, and especially the Government of India. Vajpayee replied in one word. He said '*magar…'* (but…). That one Urdu word left Kasuri shattered. His long speech had led to a one-word reply in which Vajpayee had said all that needed to be said. '*Magar'* meant that Pakistan had not kept its part of the bargain struck in Islamabad on 6 January 2004 and had carried on with its cross-border terror activities as usual. After a few further exchanges, the meeting came to an end.

The BJP never supported the UPA government's stand that terror and talks could go together.

I must admit, however, that in their conduct of diplomacy the Pakistanis have been cleverer than us. When under pressure, they can go to any length and accept any formulation to accommodate India's and the world's point of view. As soon as that pressure is off, they either resile from that position or find a way to negate the effect of the written word. The theory of 'non-state actors' is part of their continuing strategy to get out of the commitment that Musharraf had made to Vajpayee in 2004.

The history of the India-Pakistan relationship since 1947 is a saga of many broken promises by Pakistan. Unfortunately, we have been too decent and dignified to descend to their level and confront them on these broken promises. I only wish we would, and do so firmly.

From Agra to Islamabad

The high point of our relationship with Pakistan came during Vajpayee's visit to Islamabad for the SAARC Summit in January 2004. Both Brajesh Mishra and I were determined to avoid an Agra-like fiasco. Let me recap the events of 2001 here. Even though I was not EAM at the time, I was still privy to some of the goings-on as a member of the Cabinet Committee on Security and as finance minister.

Musharraf, who had become the Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan

after his military coup, had been invited by us to India for bilateral talks in Agra in July 2001, albeit without much advance preparation. Vajpayee invited me to be present at Agra where talks with Musharraf were to be held. All the members of the CCS were present. The commerce minister, Murasoli Maran has also been invited.

The talks started with a great deal of fanfare. Musharraf took full advantage of the invitation to legitimise himself in the eyes of the world and quickly appointed himself as the President of Pakistan. Thus, he made himself eligible for all the courtesies that a visiting head of state is entitled to in India. A big lunch was arranged for him in Delhi. The General used every occasion to grandstand and project himself to the hilt.

In Agra, the talks started on a one-on-one basis between Vajpayee and Musharraf. After every session, Vajpayee would brief all of us present there on the progress of the talks. For the sake of formality, a delegation-level meeting was also held. On the second day of the talks, the external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, suggested that the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Abdul Sattar and he be allowed to join the talks. This was agreed to and, at the end of some further negotiations, a draft joint statement was also prepared by the two foreign ministers. Jaswant Singh had made some changes in his own hand to the typed copy of the draft and had given a photocopy of the amended draft to Sattar. Another copy was brought by him to Vajpayee's room where the rest of us had assembled.

Advani and I looked closely at the draft and expressed our reservations on some of the formulations as well as on some of the glaring omissions. For instance, I pointed out that non-reference to the Simla Agreement of 1972 should not be acceptable to us as it had been a decisive turning point in our bilateral relationship with Pakistan. Advani also strongly objected to the absence of a reference to cross-border terrorism in the draft. All this was pointed out to Jaswant Singh as politely as possible, with a request to include these in the draft. Vajpayee also agreed with the points we had raised.

I do not know what kind of pressure he was working under, but Jaswant Singh suddenly lost his cool and angrily told us that he had finalised the draft at his level with his Pakistani counterpart; and its rejection amounted to a vote of no-confidence in him. He went on to add that he would not have anything further to do with the matter, and that the rest of us could finalise the draft as we wished. After making these remarks, he promptly stood up and left the room. Thus, the meeting ended abruptly.

As we came out of the room, a puzzled Advani looked at me and said, 'Yashwantji, did we make a mistake in pointing out our reservations?' I assured him that we had only done our duty. Advani was clearly pained and upset at the

way Jaswant Singh had reacted and he asked me to meet him to try and make him understand our position.

I went to Jaswant Singh's room, only to find him in a very glum mood. I tried to reason with him by explaining that there was nothing personal in our approach; we had the highest respect for his abilities and the points we had made were merely suggestions. It was at this stage that the joint secretary in the MEA who oversaw the Pakistan desk, Vivek Katju, walked into the room with a piece of paper to show to Jaswant Singh.

Singh's mood remained sour and he told Katju that he was not interested in looking at the paper and that perhaps Katju could show it to someone else in the delegation instead. Being the quintessential civil servant, Katju replied, 'Sir, you are my minister and I can only report to you.' Jaswant Singh did cool down later but by then the negotiations with Pakistan were already in disarray.

We all watched, in horror from Vajpayee's room, Musharraf's infamous interaction with Indian editors that was being telecast live. His style was that of a conqueror, and I have no doubt in my mind that he had come to Agra with the mindset of an army commando. His calculation was that Vajpayee would be no match for his bluff and bluster and that he would be able to win him over in no time at all.

But Vajpayee, in his own quiet way, showed Musharraf that he was made of sterner stuff.

The General was also unaware of the way our system operated, where decisions were taken collectively and not by one person alone, according to his own whims and fancy. I am also sure that Jaswant Singh would never have told Sattar that the draft he was agreeing to was India's final official position. Yet, in subsequent months, Musharraf went around the world showing the draft, corrected by Jaswant Singh in his own hand, to prove that Advani had scuttled the agreement arrived at in Agra.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

So, in view of our earlier experience at Agra, Brajesh and I had agreed that we would play it by ear when it came to our 2004 Islamabad visit. Even the PM's participation in the summit was decided only at the last moment, after Brajesh and I had reached Islamabad a day earlier. Through our sources, we enquired whether Pakistani prime minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali and Musharraf were likely to

raise any bilateral issues with India at the summit.

Once we were assured that they had no such plans, only then did we suggest that Vajpayee travel to Islamabad. The decision on any bilateral meetings with Pakistan was also left vague. Before I left Delhi, various foreign ministers, including the US secretary of state Colin Powell, telephoned me to find out whether we were planning to have bilateral meetings during our visit to Islamabad. My standard reply to everyone was that nothing had been fixed in advance.

We reached Islamabad on 2 January 2004 and, after we had assured ourselves that Pakistan was not planning to raise any bilateral issues with India at any level during the summit meeting, we decided to give the all-clear to Vajpayee and his team to travel to Islamabad. He arrived the following day and was received at the airport by prime minister Jamali with due courtesy. The SAARC Summit began, as scheduled, the following day.

Meanwhile, we tested the waters further by arranging for me to call on my Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri. He was a gentleman to the core, extremely polished and polite in his behaviour and a person one would like to be friends with in the first meeting itself. The meeting took place in a hotel and since it was a courtesy call it was not a long one. However, the entire world media was there for the unique photo opportunity the occasion provided. We exchanged pleasantries and made some small talk in a very cordial atmosphere in which we agreed to address each other by our first names.

Before we emerged from our meeting, I told Kasuri that the media was bound to ask us questions about what we had discussed. I told him it was not important what we said, because we had nothing much to say, but the important thing was to say the same thing and, as far as possible, in the same language. Kasuri accepted my suggestion. As we came out of the room, the media surrounded us and asked the usual questions. I spoke first and said that I was merely making a courtesy call on the foreign minister of Pakistan, that the meeting was brief and that no substantive issues had been discussed. Kasuri also spoke in the same vein.

Things were going well at the summit meeting. We decided, therefore, to take the next tentative step by arranging a call by Vajpayee on prime minister Jamali. We also decided that Vajpayee would neither go to the prime minister's office nor to his residence but would call on him in his temporary office as chair of the summit on the conference premises itself. This call also went off well. In the meantime, we were making progress at the summit and the agreement on a SAARC free trade area had been arrived at.

In view of Pakistan's good behaviour, we decided to arrange a call by Vajpayee on Musharraf as well. Brajesh was already talking to Tariq Aziz, his counterpart as secretary of Pakistan's National Security Council, and making satisfactory progress

on the draft of a statement to be issued after the meeting with Musharraf. Vajpayee's call on Musharraf in the presidential palace was scheduled for 6 January.

We were due to leave Islamabad in the afternoon/evening of the same day. Brajesh, meanwhile, had gone to finalise the draft of the joint press statement with Aziz and we waited for him in the hotel. He returned after a while and showed us the final draft. I did not notice anything wrong and, on the contrary, thought it was a good draft. But Vajpayee had other ideas.

The original draft read as follows (the numbering of the paragraphs has been done by me):

> '(1) The President of Pakistan and the Prime Minister of India met during the SAARC Summit in Islamabad.
> (2) The Indian Prime Minister while expressing satisfaction over the successful conclusion of the SAARC Summit appreciated the excellent arrangements made by the host country.
> (3) Both leaders welcomed the recent steps towards normalization of relations between the two countries and expressed the hope that the positive trends set by CBMs would be consolidated.
> (4) To carry the process of normalization forward, the President of Pakistan and the Prime Minister of India agreed to commence the process of composite dialogue in Feb 2004. The two leaders are confident that the resumption of the composite dialogue would lead to peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu & Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides.
> (5) Prime Minister Vajpayee said that in order to take forward and sustain the dialogue process, violence, hostility and terrorism must be prevented. President Musharraf reassured Prime Minister Vajpayee that he will not permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism in any manner.
> (6) The two leaders agreed that constructive dialogue would promote progress towards the common objective of peace, security, and economic development for our peoples and for future generations.'

Vajpayee, after carefully looking over the draft, told Brajesh that paragraph five should be brought before paragraph four. The new sequence suggested by Vajpayee significantly changed the meaning of the draft. India's readiness to resume the dialogue process with Pakistan was made conditional on Pakistan's promise to not allow territory under its control to be used for violence and terrorism against India. Implicit in this was also an admission on the part of Pakistan that the territory under its control *was indeed* being used for such violence and terrorism.

It was also a unilateral commitment by Pakistan; India did not make any such commitment as none was required. Pakistan did not say that India was also

exporting terror to Pakistan, especially in Baluchistan, and, therefore, must give a similar undertaking. This was unlike what happened subsequently during the UPA regime.

Brajesh Mishra, like Jaswant Singh at Agra, was a little reluctant to go back to his Pakistani counterpart for the last-minute change. Vajpayee, on the other hand, was quite clear about this. If the Pakistanis agreed to the amendment he had suggested, it would be issued as a joint press statement; if they did not, we would return to India without the statement. It was Vajpayee's firm 'take it or leave it' attitude that clinched the deal. The Pakistani side agreed to the amendment.

I regard the 6 January 2004 joint press statement as one of the most important foreign policy achievements of the Vajpayee period. Unfortunately, the importance of it was not fully realised in India – neither then, nor later. Musharraf took advantage of the change of government in India in May 2004 to bury this document and get out of his commitment. It is a pity we have not been able to hold Pakistan to it subsequently. The theory that terror and talks could not go together flows out of this statement.

I am also of the view that it was the direct result of India's coercive diplomacy, when we decided to amass our troops at the border with Pakistan after the Parliament attack of December 2001. I do not agree with those who think that the exercise was a waste of time, money and effort or that nothing came out of it.

After the statement was satisfactorily finalised, we left for our meeting with Musharraf, which went off reasonably well. At the meeting itself, Kasuri and I agreed that, since I was leaving for India, I should release the statement to the media first and he would follow with a separate media briefing of his own later. Following the meeting, we were to leave for the Retreat of the Heads of State and Government to be held at Jamali's residence.

However, as we came out of the presidential palace, we learnt – much to our horror – that the Pakistani information minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad, who was not even present during the meeting, had already jumped the gun and told the media his version of what had transpired at the meeting between Vajpayee and Musharraf. He had said that Pakistan had put the entire emphasis on the resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue.

He was entirely wrong, of course, and I complained loudly to Kasuri about it. He was not only apologetic but also critical of his colleague. In light of this

development, we decided that I should miss the retreat and address the media first, without any further loss of time, and before any misunderstanding was created because of the misguided briefing by the Pakistani minister. So, Brajesh and I left for the media briefing and Vajpayee went for the Retreat. The media briefing went off extremely well in front of the entire world media that had gathered there.

We returned to Delhi from Islamabad happy with what we had achieved. It is another matter that, like in the past and subsequently thereafter, Pakistan went back on its commitments and completely disregarded the assurance contained in the joint press statement of 6 January 2004. It resumed its old ways of sponsoring terror against India and passing it off as the work of 'non-state actors'.

I continued to keep in touch with my Pakistani colleagues even after demitting office in May 2004. I am a strong believer in peace with Pakistan, like most people in India. Thanks to the initiative taken by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), I have visited Pakistan on several occasions after that, leading an informal group of Indian MPs. We have also entertained them in India. I finally gave up only when I realised that dialogue with Pakistan was indeed a dialogue of the deaf.

The Pakistanis have their own warped view of India. The prejudice against India is deeply ingrained in their minds at a very early age, through the 'hate India' lessons taught to them via their school textbooks. Most Pakistanis regard India as 'Enemy No. 1' and this is reflected in the behaviour of their leaders as well.

Therefore, after many rounds of trying to break this wall, I have concluded that, under the circumstances, dialogue with Pakistan will be futile. Pakistan will continue to wage its proxy war with India through its so-called 'non-state actors'; will always pretend to be a victim rather than a perpetrator of terror; and put India at par with itself by accusing us of sponsoring terror in Baluchistan and other parts of their country. Parity with India, including military parity, is the bedrock of Pakistan's policy towards us. You only have to read Musharraf's book *In the Line of Fire*, published when he was the president of Pakistan, to understand the mindset I am referring to here.

I must also confess that when it comes to hospitality, the Pakistanis are the best in the world. They are extremely courteous, and the people-to-people contact with them is heart-warming, as also experienced by my wife. Mrs. Kasuri, who is a pioneer in the educational field, and Nilima had much to talk about and they have remained friends ever since their first meeting.

I also believe that it is India's responsibility to protect itself against terrorist attacks from across the border, not only within our territory but also as far as our establishments in Afghanistan and everywhere else in the world are concerned. We should not resort to a widow's wail every time we are attacked, and then do

nothing about it later. I have already argued in an article that I wrote for the *Economic Times* that successive Indian prime ministers should give up the dream of winning the Nobel Peace Prize by trying to please Pakistan via concessions to it.

As I have said in China's case, a bully is best dealt with by calling its bluff. Terror and talks cannot go together. However, nothing suits Pakistan more than to keep the two aligned.

There has been a regime change in Pakistan. After a supposedly fair election, a new democratic government has been formed in Pakistan under the cricketer Imran Khan. There are rumours that Khan has been elected with the backing of the Pakistan Army. It remains to be seen how the Indo-Pak relationship would develop with Imran as the prime minister of Pakistan. But regime change in Pakistan, whether through elections or through an army takeover, has not really resulted in any change in the Pakistani stand vis-a-vis India. So, we should keep our fingers crossed and wait and watch.

The US, whether we like it or not, has emerged as an important third party in our relationship with Pakistan and both countries take its help in conveying messages to each other, especially when bilateral relations are strained.

CHAPTER 26

INDO-US RELATIONS

India's relationship with the US had improved considerably after the chill that had overtaken it following the 1998 nuclear tests. Jaswant Singh had worked hard on improving it, as had Brajesh Mishra. President Bill Clinton's visit to India in March 2000 had gone off well and he had returned to the US as an admirer of India. President George W. Bush had built on it further and we were comfortable, as far as our bilateral relations with the US were concerned, during Bush Jr.'s tenure. My own equation with Colin Powell was well established by then and we could talk to each other frankly.

The underlying principle of our relationship was that we would not surprise each other. Even if we planned to take a step that might not go down well with the other, we would take each other into confidence beforehand and not spring a surprise—a principle that the US did break on some occasions. Granting Pakistan major non-NATO ally (MNNA) status in 2004 immediately comes to mind, but more on that later.

Colin Powell and I would generally meet bilaterally on the margins of multilateral meetings and discuss issues of current importance. Once, when I was on a bilateral visit to Moscow, and so was Powell, we utilised the coincidence to have a useful bilateral meeting. We often spoke to each other on the phone as well. Thus, we were always in close touch.

I specifically recall the World Summit on Sustainable Development (the Earth Summit) held in August-September 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, which was attended by both Powell and me. While we were having our bilateral meeting, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe was addressing the plenary session of the Summit. He abused the US left, right and centre, drawing enthusiastic applause from the audience almost after every sentence. The constant clapping was so loud that it made our conversation very difficult. Since Mugabe was going on and on, we decided to cut our meeting short. Powell was clearly very embarrassed.

However, a more embarrassing incident was to come later.

In the wake of the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Bush Administration was very keen that India send a large contingent of Indian troops to Iraq and was putting tremendous pressure on us to do so.

Some respected columnists in the media were also clamouring for it. There were some in the government as well, mainly LK Advani and Jaswant Singh, who also thought that we should accept the US request as it would dramatically upgrade our bilateral relationship. During his visit to the US in June 2003, Advani even gave positive indications of our willingness to do so in his meeting with the US vice president Dick Cheney.

However, Vajpayee kept his own counsel and refused to be pressured. Sonia Gandhi had written a letter to Vajpayee opposing any such move, and he promptly called her for a meeting. She came, accompanied by Pranab Mukherjee, Manmohan Singh and Natwar Singh, and Vajpayee listened to them with great interest. He also consulted the BJP's NDA partners on this issue, besides having a discussion in a meeting of the Union Cabinet.

The weight of opinion was against India participating in any way in the US occupation of Iraq. Even the despatch of a medical contingent was ruled out. That was just Vajpayee's way of doing things. He would consult everyone but ultimately do what he felt was in the best interest of the nation. He believed it was best to defeat and discard the individual opinions of people close to him by building a consensus against these. That was just his style.

Thus, the US request was not acceded to, based precisely on such a consensus.

The American invasion of Iraq led to yet another problem for us. Parliament was in session at the time and the Congress party, which pretended to be quite anti-American in its attitude, insisted that Parliament adopt a resolution condemning the US action. Personally, I was against such a resolution, not because I supported the US action but because I felt that a parliamentary resolution should not reduce the scope for flexibility in government policy. The Congress party decided to stall proceedings in both Houses until we agreed to the resolution.

We stood our ground for a few days. In meetings before the speaker of the Lok Sabha, I reminded the Congress leaders of a similar situation when the Soviets had attacked Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviets had invaded the country in August 1968 to crack down on reformists in Prague. Following that, prime minister Indira Gandhi had flatly rejected the suggestion for a parliamentary resolution at that time, condemning the Soviet action. This is what is recorded in an article from the

Wilson Centre (without the relevant citations in the excerpt).[17]

> [...] growing closeness became difficult to manage for New Delhi when the Soviets occupied Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Initially, in a statement in the Lok Sabha, Indira Gandhi noted this development with disapproval, stating 'the right of nations to live peacefully and without outside interference should not be denied in the name of religion or ideology…' The American press in particular gave the Indian position favourable coverage, commenting that Mrs. Gandhi had 'urged the Soviet Union and its allies to withdraw their troops at the earliest possible moment.' The editorial also mentioned that in fact, 'her statement was in marked contrast with the silence of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, during the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956.'
>
> Yet, in the United Nations Security Council, India avoided condemning the USSR, finally abstaining in the vote on the Czechoslovakia matter. Unsurprisingly, India's non-vote attracted widespread criticism from the American press. Editorials first noted that leaders from within the socialist bloc, like Tito and Ceausescu, had not hesitated in distancing themselves from the Soviet position. It was then reported that conversely, in abstaining from the vote, India, Pakistan, and Algeria had shown 'which nations can and cannot be counted on to stand up for principle'. It was later reported that socialist members of Parliament in India had been unable to vote on and push forward a resolution condemning Soviet action, and had been actively blocked by Mrs. Gandhi, a maneuver that led to the resignation of a much-respected socialist member of Parliament, Ashok Mehta. The press coverage also clearly stated that India had abstained in order to be useful in mediating the conflict and that Mrs. Gandhi had been called upon to 'be more courageous'. The episode in the Indian parliament showed clearly the divisions between various factions even within the organized left, with one side supporting Mrs. Gandhi, while the other violently decried the Indian position at the UN, asking for the government to resign, and shouting slogans such as 'Long Live Czechoslovakia!' and 'Long Live Dubcek!...'

Manmohan Singh even asked me to show him the relevant proceedings of the Lok Sabha on the issue, with which I was well armed, having anticipated such a request. He must have carried this information to the Congress leadership but, clearly, it had no impact and the Congress party continued to stall proceedings in both Houses.

Ultimately Vajpayee called me, along with the then minister for parliamentary affairs, Sushma Swaraj, and categorically told us to find a solution. He could not allow the Houses to remain paralysed any longer. After this clear political directive, we sat down with the Congress party and worked out an acceptable draft. In Hindi, we agreed to use the word '*ninda*' (censure) but in the English version of the draft the word '*ninda*' was replaced with the word 'deplore'. A compromise was thus reached, the resolution was adopted, and Parliament could function once again.

Vajpayee was, undoubtedly, a great democrat and an equally great parliamentarian. The way the stalemate was tackled by him is a lesson for all prime ministers. Parliamentary democracy is a game of give and take, after all.

In January 2004, Powell invited me to visit the US for bilateral talks. I decided to accept the offer and visit Washington. The usual meetings at the State department, with the national security advisor Condoleezza Rice in the White House and leading members of the US Congress, were fixed in advance for my three-day visit.

When I arrived in Washington, I was told by our ambassador Lalit Mansingh that despite his busy schedule, President Bush had invited me to meet him in the Oval Office the following morning. This was to be my first official engagement in Washington. It was a very special gesture and I was happy that I would be meeting the US president in his famous Oval Office. As per protocol, I could take two officials with me for the meeting. Ambassador Lalit Mansingh was, of course, a must. The other person I chose was a deputy secretary in the MEA, Javed Ashraf—an extremely bright officer who looked after the US desk and had accompanied me on the trip.

We reached the White House a little before the appointed time for my meeting with the president. I was received with due courtesy and the White House officials present showed us around until we were ushered into the Oval office. The meeting was a courtesy call and, hence, was supposed to be brief, no more than ten minutes.

President Bush met me warmly; we shook hands and sat in front of the famous mantlepiece, which was decorated with fresh roses. Colin Powell and his deputy, Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, along with a few other officials of the White House were present at the meeting—a formidable US contingent indeed. After exchanging pleasantries, president Bush enquired about the Indian general elections that were due shortly, and I explained our electoral system to him. He was quite impressed when I told him that a leader like Vajpayee would be addressing 1,00,000- or even 2,00,000-strong audiences during his election campaign. He showed great interest in our electoral system and our style of campaigning.

The discussion went on and the ten-minute limit was soon exceeded. The President had to deliver his State of the Union address to the US Congress the following day and had to prepare for it. When we crossed the fifteen-minute mark, the White House staff started to get a little restive. I could sense their impatience

but could not afford to ignore the questions President Bush was asking me. At the end of about 20 minutes, with the presidential staff in a near panic, I thanked the President profusely for the time he had given me and took his leave.

I had met Bush earlier for the first time during a bilateral meeting Vajpayee had with him on the sidelines of the meeting of the UNGA in 2002. We had also met at the customary dinner the US president gives for the visiting heads of state/ government and their foreign ministers. Nilima and I had had a pleasant interaction with George Bush and his wife, Laura. Both my wife and Laura Bush exchanged gifts. Nilima presented a book on Indian folk tales for kids to Mrs. Bush – who also writes for children – and, in return, she gave my wife a signed photograph of hers, which I remember giving to our grandson Rishabh.

I had also met him again in 2003, again during the dinner he had hosted for the delegates attending the UNGA meeting. He asked me about Vajpayee and when I told him that he was not present at the dinner, Bush had quipped 'wise man'. In my encounters with him, he did not come out as the odd man the media often portrayed him as.

The photograph of my January 2004 bilateral meeting with president Bush had appeared quite prominently in all Indian newspapers, including in my constituency Hazaribagh. During my next visit to Hazaribagh, I had expected my constituents to welcome me warmly; after all, a special honour had been bestowed on their MP by the most powerful person in the world. No such welcome followed. The people of Hazaribagh remained unimpressed and I lost the 2004 election by over 1,00,000 votes.

I learnt many lessons from that defeat, the most important being that local issues are far more important in an election than global ones. But more on that later.

Powell later paid another visit to India in March 2004 and we had very productive and cordial talks. However, during the same trip and after visiting India, he proceeded onward to Pakistan and made an announcement there that the US had decided to make Pakistan a major non-NATO ally (MNNA).

This came as a complete surprise—a rude shock, in fact—to all of us, especially since the timing and abruptness of the announcement, on the heels of his India visit, violated the bilateral rule of 'no surprises'. I made my unhappiness known to the US authorities via diplomatic channels. A few days later Powell called me and

apologised, but the damage had already been done.

How right Vajpayee had been when he told me to be cautious in my dealings with the US!

His advice to me apart, Vajpayee was, undoubtedly, keen to improve our relationship with the US but he never wanted India to become a client state. He wanted the relationship to advance on the accepted principles of equality, reciprocity and mutual respect. The fact that he did not visit the US at the height of the Kargil War, when President Clinton had invited both Nawaz Sharif and him for talks in Washington, was proof of his wise caution.

CHAPTER 27

ENGAGING WITH ASIA: CHINA, CENTRAL ASIA, THE SOUTHEAST AND ASEAN

China: Calling the Bully's Bluff

I made my first visit to China in 1983. My son-in-law, Ashok Kantha, was posted in the embassy there and my daughter, Sharmila, had joined him in Beijing after their marriage earlier in the year. I was visiting South Korea on official work as joint secretary, shipping, in the Government of India. I could not resist the temptation to combine it with a private visit to Beijing for a couple of days.

China, in the early Eighties, was still under strict communist rule. Beijing mostly had single-story buildings; men and women were dressed in their blue uniforms; and Bejing's streets were full of bicycles. Cars were a rare sight and there was great celebration when farmers were allowed to sell the vegetables they were growing, in Beijing's roadside markets. We made a trip to the Great Wall and stopped at a scenic spot to have a picnic lunch on the way back. Sharmila and Ashok pointed out that I would not see any birds or insects even in the forest because, during the 'cultural revolution' all of them had been killed by the people. The only birds that survived were in the diplomatic area of the city.

I visited China again years later, in 2002 as the finance minister of India, to attend the annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank in Shanghai. I was told that there was a time when Bombay (Mumbai) and Shanghai were at par. In fact, Shanghai used to be considered a little behind Bombay in many matters. I was warned, however, that Shanghai citizens did not like their city being compared to Bombay any more. I was not surprised. China had changed unrecognisably

between my last visit and this one. This prompted me to remark to a group of Chinese investors, who I met in Shanghai during this visit, that ‘it is not my first trip to China. I had come here thousands of years ago in 1983.’ Indeed, this is how I felt when I saw the fantastic progress that China had made. Since then, in all my visits to China, I have never ceased to wonder at the marvel that China is.

The thought of China, therefore, fills me with both awe and admiration, on the one hand, and like and dislike on the other. Awe and admiration at the progress it has made in every walk of national life. ‘Like’, I say, because of our almost umbilical historical relationship, because of Budhism, because of Tibet and Kailash Mansarovar, because of Fa-hien and Huensang, and because of the countless other ties that bind us together. The Chinese and Pakistanis are fond of saying that they are joined together by rivers and mountains. Are India and China not similarly joined together?

'Dislike', even intense dislike, because of the way it has evolved into a bully today, and the way its rise is threatening its smaller neighbours and the rest of the world. I have never liked bullies in my personal life and, therefore, do not like them on the international relations stage either. A point of reference is China's summoning Nirupama Rao, our ambassador in Beijing, at an unearthly hour of three in the morning once.

India became independent and China came under communist rule almost at the same time. Nehru became a world figure almost instantaneously after Independence and he started to play a role in world affairs that was hugely disproportionate to the economic and military strength of India. The non-aligned movement (NAM) provided the platform that he needed to play that role, and he straddled the world stage like a colossus. Many leaders from other countries cooperated with him willingly. It was natural, under the circumstances, for India and China to become friends and they did.

It was this friendship that persuaded Nehru not to stand in the way of China’s annexation of Tibet, which made that country our immediate neighbour. A boundary dispute followed and ultimately resulted in the one-sided, limited war of 1962, in which China not only inflicted a shameful and crushing defeat on India but also achieved what it wanted to as far as territory was concerned. Nehru had an understanding of history, no doubt, but he made the cardinal mistake of ignoring China’s imperial record. Today’s China is no different from what it has been throughout history. The inequality and imbalance that has crept into our relationship as a result of the mistake we made in 1962 is evident in all our subsequent dealings with China. China commands and we obey.

Vajpayee paid a bilateral visit to China in October 2003, and I accompanied him. My son-in-law Ashok Kantha, who was joint secretary in the MEA dealing

with China, was also a member of the Indian delegation. India was keen to show the visit as a highly successful one. Brajesh Mishra directly took charge of drafting the joint statement, to be issued at the end of the visit.

The drafting exercise between the two sides obviously went on until the wee hours of the morning. India was keen for China to recognise its sovereignty over Sikkim. In the process, however, Brajesh Mishra agreed to a new formulation relating to Tibet that was a departure from our earlier established position. In all earlier joint documents, Tibet had always been referred to as the 'autonomous region of Tibet'. In this document, we agreed to refer to Tibet as the 'Tibet autonomous region'. The difference between the two is that while the former refers to a larger Tibet, which is what Tibet has been in history all along, the latter refers to a much smaller Tibet as defined in the Chinese Constitution.

By the time I woke up and the matter was brought to my notice, it was already too late to intervene and correct the communique. China did accept, albeit indirectly, India's sovereignty over Sikkim by agreeing to trade through Nathu La 'in the Indian state of Sikkim'.

Another development during the visit was raising the level of discussions on the boundary question with China, involving the National Security Advisor on the Indian side and a senior political functionary on the Chinese side. Many meetings have taken place at this level, but we are still far from a solution to the vexing boundary question.

There is no doubt that China has made enormous progress on the economic front in a shorter period than any other country before it, and is miles ahead of India both economically and militarily. Yet, this is no reason for it to behave as it often does—like a neighbourhood bully. The only way to deal with a bully is to call its bluff. Unfortunately, in all our dealings with China, we have never been able to summon the courage to call China's bluff and have allowed it to get away with humiliating us on several occasions. This continues even during the present regime. 'Friendship at any cost' is a dangerous principle to follow in foreign policy. It immediately puts you at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the other country.

I hope some day India will be able to get out of the deep wound to its psyche that was inflicted by the humiliation of the 1962 war with China, and will be able to deal with it on the basis of sovereign equality and mutual advantage. India's motto should be to cooperate with China where such cooperation is for mutual benefit; compete with it where such competion is in its national interest; and stand up to it where such a posture is necessarry to protect our freedom and territory. I have not seen such a regime in our country yet.

Malaysia

Our relationship with Malaysia, although cordial, had its problems—and not just in matters relating to Pakistan. For instance, Ottavio Quattrocci, who was facing criminal charges in the Bofors case, had been given shelter in Malaysia. We had already negotiated, concluded and initialled an extradition treaty with Malaysia. Only its formal signing and ratification was pending.

We repeatedly took up the issue of the early signing of the extradition treaty, and its ratification, with them but they kept delaying the matter on some pretext or the other. We also took up the specific issue of the extradition or repatriation of Quattrocci but, here too, they only had excuses to offer. I have no doubt in my mind that the Malaysian leadership had been compromised in the case and was deliberately delaying the steps they were required to take. They offered us nothing but excuses till Quattrocci fled Malaysia for good in 2003 and returned to Italy. The CBI lost two separate appeals to extradite him, in Malaysia (2002) and Argentina (2007).

Central Asia: Links, old and new

I paid a lot of attention to our other Asian neighbours as well, such as Iran, Syria, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. During my visit to Tajikistan, we concluded an agreement for setting up a joint working group on terrorism. We also offered the Tajiks a credit line of $75 million and another of $25 million for supplies. I called on President Emomali Rahmon and addressed the Tajik National State University as well.

Nilima had accompanied me on the visit to Uzbekistan, which we enjoyed immensely. Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara are famous places in Indian history, as is Timur or Tamerlane who had invaded India in 1398. Tamerlane is a hero in his own country and was obviously a learned and considerate ruler. The Uzbeks are quite proud of him.

An amusing incident took place during my trip to Kyrgyzstan—the first ever by

an Indian external affairs minister. Himanshu Kumar was one of my staff members from Hazaribagh. In fact, I had three of them—Nand Kumar Jaiswal, Ramashish Singh and Himanshu. They stayed with me at my Kushak Road residence and one of them was always on rotating telephone duty all the time. They also looked after visitors from Hazaribagh, who felt more comfortable with them than with my Delhi staff. They were happy to call themselves 'three idiots' later, after the famous Bollywood movie.

At the official dinner in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek, Himanshu, who had accompanied me on the trip, happened to be sitting next to the host nation's army chief. I had already warned him about the use of cutlery during meals and about being very careful about what he said during conversations, so he stuck to the time-tested formula of just mumbling 'yes', 'no' and 'very well', at the risk of not making a fool of himself.

Central Asia itself is a unique amalgam of Buddhist, Christian and Islamic cultures. The soft power of India is quite evident in all these countries. Bollywood films and their stars continue to be popular. Our educational programmes also have many takers there. It is not unusual to come across an important government functionary who has studied in India. Seeing India's popularity at play like this, I feel we do not utilise these advantages enough.

'Dragons, tigers and elephants on the move': India and ASEAN

> *'As statistics show, the dragons, tigers and elephants within the Asian landmass have begun to move with the hiccups of the late 1990s behind them.'*—My speech at Harvard University, 29 September 2003

Summit-level meetings with ASEAN also took off during this period. I travelled for one such meeting to Cambodia in 2003 in the PM's special plane. During the flight, Vajpayee asked me whether I had seen the speech that had been prepared for him. The PMO used to prepare his speeches based on inputs received from various ministries, especially the ministries of commerce and external affairs. The final version was not shown, even to me, and was a trade secret of the PMO. So, I

frankly told Vajpayee that I had not seen the final draft.

He immediately told his officials to show it to me. 'It is a good draft, but what is news worthy in the speech?' I asked the PMO officials, who looked at me in surprise. I told them that ASEAN already had a free trade agreement (FTA) with China, Japan and South Korea, which were its summit partners. Should India, as the fourth summit partner, not offer to have an FTA with ASEAN? The suggestion was accepted by Vajpayee and commerce secretary Deepak Chatterjee, who was also on the same flight, was asked to draft a few sentences to include the offer in Vajpayee's speech. As expected, it became the highlight of his address.

Within ASEAN, Singapore was particularly friendly toward India. Both Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and foreign minister S. Jayakumar believed that if ASEAN was an aircraft then India and China were its two wings; the plane could not fly without both. The foreign minister would often warn me, in advance, of the little conspiracies that some member countries would be planning against India, especially relating to Pakistan.

CHAPTER 28

RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Raw diamonds and 'a fresh coat of paint'

Our relationship with Russia was managed by the NDA government as deftly as the one with US, and the improvement in our relationship with the US was not allowed to affect the former in any way. The infrastructure of the relationship was already in place, with annual summit meetings being rotated between New Delhi and Moscow. These included an annual defence dialogue and annual meetings of the Intergovernmental Commission that looked after all the remaining aspects of the relationship. The secretariat of the commission was in the MEA and was headed by the joint secretary in charge of relations with Russia.

After becoming PM in March 1998, Vajpayee kept the foreign ministry with himself and continued holding that portfolio until he appointed Jaswant Singh to the post in December 1998. In the normal course, the external affairs minister should have been nominated the co-chair of this commission, but, I suppose, since Vajpayee himself was the EAM, he nominated me as the co-chair. I paid my first visit to Moscow for its meeting in November 1998. When Jaswant Singh became the EAM in December that year, he suggested that he become the co-chair of this Commission, but Vajpayee did not accept the suggestion and I continued as before.

In turn, when I moved to the MEA, I formally moved a note suggesting that Jaswant Singh, who had changed places with me as finance minister, should head the commission from our side. Singh had changed his mind, in the meantime, and wanted me to continue as co-chair. This time, the PM accepted his suggestion instead and rejected mine, albeit with the same result, and I continued as co-chair. Thus, throughout the tenure of the Vajpayee government, I remained the co-chair from the Indian side, first as finance minister and later as the minister for external

affairs.

President Vladimir Putin visited India in December 2002 for the annual summit meeting. His engagements included a meeting with Indian businessmen, jointly organised by CII and FICCI. I was present in the meeting and, in my remarks, I complimented him for having done what we had been unable to do ourselves—bringing the two chambers of industry together. Putin also visited Mumbai and since he was leaving for Moscow directly from there, I was deputed to see him off at Mumbai airport.

Mrs. Putin had accompanied the President on this visit. She had her own programme in Mumbai and, according to protocol, arrived before the President at the airport as we all waited for him. She made a remark that left all of us, especially the Maharashtra leaders, red in the face. She said that she was quite disappointed at the lack of maintenance of the buildings in Mumbai. 'All of them need a fresh coat of paint,' she said. The Maharashtra leaders offered some lame excuses that failed to impress Mrs. Putin.

The following year, I accompanied Vajpayee for the annual summit meeting in Moscow, in November 2003. The meeting was at the Kremlin. Before the delegation-level meet, a one-on-one meeting was scheduled between Vajpayee and Putin where, as per practice, Brajesh Mishra and I were expected to be present. Vajpayee and Mishra travelled in the same car from the hotel to the Kremlin, as Brajesh had some last-minute briefing to do.

I was in a separate car with our ambassador to Russia, K. Raghunath. When we entered the Kremlin, Vajpayee's vehicle took a different route from the rest of us, while we were guided to a separate entrance where we were subjected to a security check. This was completely unexpected, and I did not like it at all.

Once we had cleared security, I told the Kremlin staff to take me to where the Vajpayee-Putin meeting was taking place. They expressed their inability to do so. The ambassador and others intervened to inform them that I was the external affairs minister of India and had to be present at the meeting. Even this information did not cut any ice with the immovable Kremlin security. The situation was becoming increasingly unpleasant and I told our ambassador that there was no point in my waiting any longer and that he should take me back to the hotel. Poor chap, he had no choice but to obey his minister and we both walked out.

We had no idea where our cars were, but I insisted on leaving the Kremlin immediately. As we strode toward the exit gate, two protocol officials of the Kremlin rushed over to us, pleading for us to return. I rejected their suggestion out of hand, and the Ambassador and I walked out of the Kremlin, boarded the car that had reached there in the meantime and returned to our hotel.

Igor Ivanov, the foreign minister of Russia, somehow came to learn about the

mess created by the Kremlin security and about my having returned to the hotel. He telephoned me immediately. Naturally, I was quite upset and angry and told him to carry on without me. He realised the gravity of the situation and rushed to my hotel room to personally plead with me, apologising profusely and asking me to accompany him to the Kremlin. He explained that the Kremlin had its own security and protocol that was different from the foreign office, and that they had not been properly briefed, due to which the mistake had been made. He further said that he would take me in his own car to the Kremlin, which would not be subjected to any security check.

Well, I had already made my point; the foreign minister of Russia had not only offered his apologies but had come personally to escort me back to the Kremlin. So, I finally relented and accompanied him back to the Kremlin. We reached just in time, as the two delegations were lining up to be introduced to the principals. A diplomatic incident had taken place, no doubt, but had been discreetly resolved due to the presence of mind of my Russian counterpart. On my part, I walked away with the satisfaction that I had made my point—never to compromise our national honour.

Apart from this minor diplomatic faux pas, our relationship with Russia during the period was at its most cordial. In fact, before Vajpayee's November 2003 visit, I had paid a bilateral visit to Russia in February 2003 and had been received by president Putin at the Kremlin—a meeting that had lasted for over an hour.

Though I did not deal directly with our defence relationship, I knew that a great deal was happening in that sector. The overall economic relationship had been deepening, though bilateral trade remained a concern. We were able to break fresh ground in two specific areas: the petroleum sector through participation in the Sakhalin oil fields, and in the supply of raw diamonds from Russia.

The relationship with Russia had always been regarded as very special and we did our best to keep it that way.

Breaking new ground: The European Union (and member countries)

New ground was broken in our relationship with the European Union (EU) during

Vajpayee's prime ministership. The first summit meeting between India and the EU took place in Lisbon in June 2000. I was finance minister at the time, but Vajpayee insisted that I come along. The evening before the summit meeting, Vajpayee, as he was wont to do, invited us for dinner at a beautiful restaurant by the sea. It was a famous place visited by many dignitaries from across the world, and their photographs adorned the restaurant's walls.

The main dish at the dinner was a specially-prepared and very tasty fish, which we all enjoyed immensely. But when the meeting began the following morning, the PM leaned over and whispered to me that he had not slept properly because of an upset stomach. Vajpayee enjoyed his food, perhaps even more when in the company of people that he liked. So, on every trip, we enjoyed one dinner out at least, hosted by him for a select few. He was particularly fond of Chinese food and had his favourite restaurants in cities like London and New York.

As a matter of habit, Vajpayee did not talk much at delegation-level meetings. He would generally make the opening remarks and let the rest of the discussion be continued by Brajesh Mishra and me. He intervened only when necessary. World leaders listened to him very attentively and with great respect. He was always very confident and never felt the need to prove himself before any audience.

Our relationship with the important member countries of the EU, like the UK, Germany and France progressed comfortably during my tenure, with rotating bilateral visits and a series of summit-level meetings. I especially recall how, during a visit to the foreign office in London, I asked Jack Straw to show me the famous window through which a former British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, had looked out and said, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.' These famous words were purportedly uttered by him to a friend in August 1914 as the British Cabinet, in a marathon meeting lasting till the wee hours of the morning, debated action against Germany, and finally decided to declare war on it.

I had always felt a special affinity towards Germany where I had spent nearly four years when I was in the civil service. As chance would have it, I visited Germany more often than any other country in Europe during my tenure in the ministries of finance and external affairs. I was once invited by the Ostasiatischer Verein (German Asia-Pacific Business Association) in Hamburg to address its annual meeting. The Society had been founded by German traders in Shanghai in 1900 and has continued in a different form since then.

I was told that this was a special honour as I was the first non-German to be invited to address its annual meeting. I began my speech in German, which was received with a roar of applause from the audience. Though my German was not good enough to progress beyond a few sentences, I was happy to have made a

connection.

I formed a special friendship with the finance minister of Germany, Hans Eichel, who was our host for the first meeting of the G 20 in Berlin. The meeting was held in the newly-renovated Reichstag building that I had visited in 1972 when it was in ruins, while I was posted in Germany. I was very happy to see and visit the renovated building, as well as the fully-restored Brandenburg Gate and the famous street called Unter Den Linden.

Hans Eichel always received me with great courtesy and often with some undeserved pomp, like motorcycle outriders. He was also instrumental in getting me elected as the chairman of the G 20 later. This is one transnational friendship that has survived the test of time. Years later, when I visited Berlin as an MP, he specially travelled from his home outside of Berlin to meet me.

Above all, I have always cherished my special association with Germany—one that was forged while I was still in the IAS.

An embarrassing situation arose during the summit meeting between India and the EU in Copenhagen, Denmark, in October 2002. The Danish prime minister was the chair of the EU and had raised the issue of human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir during the meeting, as well as immediate resumption of dialogue with Pakistan. From our side, we had given a convincing reply rebutting the arguments he had advanced. Thus, we were shocked when he raised the issue, quite unexpectedly, during the press briefing once again. After the brief press conference by the two principals was over, I immediately swung into action to brief the media separately and clear the misunderstanding that had been created.

Javier Solana was the EU's member-in-charge of external relations at that time. He had earlier been the secretary general of NATO, and the foreign minister of Spain before that. We had become good friends and I would often take advantage of our friendship to brief him in advance about issues that were likely to come up in our discussions with EU officials and foreign ministers of member countries. These were mostly issues about which they might have had prejudicial views, and Solana helped in seeing to it that they were not taken up in the formal meetings.

The business relationship between India and the EU was also progressing suitably well, overall, during the time I was EAM. The summit-level meetings were always accompanied by a business summit, and India had already emerged as a significant investor when it came to the European Union. I was happy to note that in these business summits, Indian businessmen complained equally loudly about restrictive trade and investment practices followed by some of the EU countries. Clearly, we had reached a sort of parity and the complaints were no longer a one-way street and only about India.

In fact, several Indian corporates were buying companies in European

countries, including Germany. I remember a remark made by the German President Horst Köhler – who had earlier been the Managing Director of the IMF – before a distinguished international audience. He told the gathering how he had been sitting next to an Indian businessman at a dinner once and the man, attempting to please him, had said, 'Sir, I always buy German companies. They are the best.'

CHAPTER 29

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE: ELBOWING FOR ROOM

I decided to devote a lot of my time and attention to the countries in South America and Africa. My plan was to build deeper trade and economic relations, both bilaterally and through the trade blocks in these continents. I freely offered to conclude preferential trade agreements with some of these trading blocks. We did make some progress in this regard.

I have already mentioned some of my interactions during the 2002 UNGA meeting in New York. One of these was an interesting meeting with the foreign ministers of the Central American countries. I later invited ministers from these countries to visit India and a large delegation of ministers from the Sistema de la Integracion (System of Central American Integration or SICA) came to India for a five-day visit in February 2004.[18] The delegation included the foreign ministers of Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, the vice-foreign minister of Costa Rica, the SICA secretary-general and the foreign minister of the Dominican Republic, which was an associate member of SICA.

I remember hosting a lunch in their honour at Hyderabad House in Delhi, where I presented them with books that included the then president Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam's book, one on yoga, and a collection of Vajpayee's poems. Thus, we made a promising beginning with this part of the world too. In fact, the visit was pathbreaking because never had so many ministers from the region visited India since Independence.

Another important landmark was achieved when senior ministers (including those for foreign affairs) of eight West African countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mali and Senegal—visited India in March 2004. Together with India, these nations formed the Techno-Economic Approach for Africa-India Movement, better known as the TEAM-9 Initiative.

IBSA

When it came to India's relationship with countries of these two regions, the highlight, of course, was the formation of IBSA—a trilateral alliance among India, Brazil and South Africa. The idea of such a trilateral had been informally discussed among the foreign ministers of these three countries on various occasions and, once our mind was made up, we decided to meet in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, to sign the final documents.

IBSA formally came into being on 6 June 2003. The first meeting of the Trilateral Commission of the IBSA Dialogue Forum, however, was held in New Delhi only in March 2004. Apart from me representing India, it consisted of Celso Amorim and Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the foreign ministers of Brazil and South Africa, respectively.

I regarded this as a great achievement, as the three most important countries across three continents had finally come together to form the small group. My idea was not merely to increase trade, economic cooperation and political understanding amongst the three countries, but to also form a credible group of three important economies to influence the course of international events. In my view, large groupings of nations like the G-77, (NAM), and even the G-15, had largely lost their relevance and become dysfunctional. I felt that India needed to take the lead in forming smaller groups to tackle both existing and emerging global issues effectively, with the help of other important countries prepared to play such a role.

Had I not demitted office in 2004, I would have certainly ensured that IBSA played a role in the resolution of the Palestinian issue and in the standoff between the US and Iran. The Syrian crisis also offered a similar opportunity.

From time to time, until we allowed BRICS to overtake IBSA, China was keen to join this trilateral forum. I told my other two colleagues that we should not even discuss the issue of new membership until IBSA had achieved its full potential. I am sorry to note that it has not yet achieved its full potential and continues to lag behind BRICS. The presence of China in BRICS is increasingly becoming akin to the presence of Pakistan in SAARC. I wish India had paid more attention to IBSA.

Venezuela

My last visit for a multilateral meeting as EAM was in February 2004 to Venezuela when I was deputed to attend the G-15 summit, due to Vajpayee's preoccupation with the impending general elections. Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was the host and chair of the meeting. I remember the visit for two special reasons.

The first was that President Chavez not only received me for a bilateral call but also spent quite a long time with me over an hour or so. I had been warned, in advance, that he might not be friendly toward me as India had once invited him to visit New Delhi as the chief guest at the Republic Day parade, only to withdraw the invitation later. This had made Chavez so angry that when Murasoli Maran, the commerce minister in our government, visited Caracas, Chavez agreed to meet him only to keep him waiting for forty-five minutes before cancelling the meeting altogether. Fortunately for me, my encounter with him turned out to be an extremely pleasant and friendly one. In fact, he enjoyed the conversation so much that he extended the meeting to eighty minutes, compared to the half hour which had been slated for it.

The second experience was even more pleasant. When I made my intervention during the plenary meeting of the G-15, Chavez made a remark that I still wear as a medal of honour. He said, 'We are all very impressed by the intervention you have made and the suggestions you have given about improving the effectiveness of our Group. We are not surprised, though, because for us, India is like the best centre forward of the best football team of our continent.' Quite a compliment indeed, I felt, in a continent obsessed with soccer!

Australia

My bilateral visit to Australia in August 2003 was another interesting experience. The Australian foreign minister, Alexander Downer, was already a good friend. He had once admired a white silk suit that I had worn to a meeting with him. I responded to the compliment by getting a similar one stitched for him by Madhav, my tailor in Mumbai. Downer took me to more than one city in Australia, so that Nilima and I could visit Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, apart from the capital city of Canberra, during our visit. Prime minister John Howard, with whom I had also become quite friendly, even offered Nilima and me a ride in his official plane from Canberra to Sydney.

On the way, we discussed cricket as he was a great fan. My knowledge of cricket, however, was quite limited. Since the game had not been very popular in school, being considered a preserve of the elite—for example, the boys from Mission schools—I had not played it in my early years or later, concentrating instead on other athletic pursuits.

Hence, I was unable to enlighten Howard when he asked me the name of the Indian cricketer who had scored a double century in the second innings in a Test match against Australia, at Eden Gardens in Kolkata. Despite being forced into a follow-on in the second Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, India went on to win the test. It was in March 2001 and the batsman was VVS Laxman, as Howard himself recalled later. Laxman's 281, and the match itself, remains one of the all-time greats in international cricketing history.

CHAPTER 30

A MEDLEY OF NATIONS: NAM AND THE COMMONWEALTH

Not Quite Aligned: NAM

During my time in the MEA, the 13th summit meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) took place in Malaysia in February 2003. In all such meetings, Pakistan, under Musharraf, would be up to its usual tricks to embarrass India. We learnt that Malaysia, as the host of the conference, was not only sympathetic to Pakistan's cause but even party to the conspiracy that was being hatched to include a reference to the strained bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, with a special mention of the Jammu and Kashmir issue.

We were determined to nip any such move—in the bud. At the official level, we made our point of view quite clear. Yet, not being fully satisfied, I sought a meeting with the then foreign minister of Malaysia Syed Hamid Albar and told him in no certain terms that if Malaysia became party to any such move, it would adversely impact our bilateral relationship. The stern warning did the trick and we were spared the diplomatic embarrassment.

The summit itself was quite a circus. NAM had expanded over the years and many countries that were clearly militarily aligned with the US had also become its members. At the meeting of the foreign ministers, I remember how many Arab countries, which had permitted the setting up of US military bases on their soil, spoke very strongly against military alliances and the emergence of a unipolar world.

In my speech, I pointed out the contradictions between practice and precept, and between word and deed. Further, I urged those present to speak in the same

language at bilateral as well as multilateral fora, and practice what they preached. I added that the use of strong language in favour of non-alignment and against military pacts at the forum, while entering into military pacts when back home, did us no credit as a group.

Vajpayee also made a truly statesman-like speech, which was widely appreciated. We utilised the occasion to have many bilateral meetings as well, notable among them being one with Fidel Castro. Meeting the legendary Cuban leader was a thrilling experience. I had never expected that I would get a chance to meet him in person and, having heard and read so much about him, being face-to-face with him was indeed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He was also very happy to meet members of the Indian delegation and recalled his fond association with India.

A Motley Crew: The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth, another interesting medley of nations, was not without its problems. When I took over as the EAM, India was already a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). This was an eight-member group of nations charged with the special responsibility of ensuring that member countries of the Commonwealth adhered to its core values, enshrined in the Harare Declaration of 1991 and further refined from time to time.

Democracy and human rights are important values that member countries of the Commonwealth are expected to adhere to and honour. Therefore, when Musharraf pulled off a military coup in Pakistan in 1999, the Commonwealth promptly suspended Pakistan from its membership. Pakistan held a sham election, based on which it claimed restoration of its full membership of the Commonwealth. A meeting of the CMAG was held in London in November 2002 to discuss the matter.

I had gone fully prepared to block the lifting of the suspension. Botswana was the chair of CMAG and its foreign minister Mompati Merafhe was to preside over the meeting. I had met him a day earlier and found him quite amiable, but he suddenly started behaving in a rather unfriendly manner toward me during the meeting. Strangely, and to my utter surprise, Bangladesh's Morshed Khan also

started behaving like a staunch supporter of Pakistan. Some other countries lent their support to Pakistan as well.

Fortunately, my arguments and the facts backing them, were so convincing that I was able to carry the day and ensure that Pakistan remained suspended from the Commonwealth. I received much-needed support from the foreign ministers of countries like Australia and the Bahamas. I later learnt that Pakistan's foreign minister had visited London earlier, and met some of my colleagues in the CMAG to convince them to lift Pakistan's suspension. It was this visit, and some questionable methods adopted by Pakistan to influence the outcome, that were behind some of my colleagues changing their mind at the meeting and behaving as they did.

A meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) was held in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, in December 2003, hosted by the country's president Olusegun Obasanjo. Both Vajpayee and I attended it. This routine summit meeting, which is held every two years, turned out to be very important for several reasons. In fact, the trip was quite memorable due to my personal experiences as well.

It was my first visit to Nigeria. Vajpayee and I were travelling separately on this trip. I first landed in Lagos in the evening from where I had to take a flight to Abuja the following morning. I stayed overnight in Lagos. The Nigerian government had provided the usual security on the journey from the airport to the hotel. There was a pilot car ahead of my vehicle but, interestingly, it did not have a red beacon or a siren. Instead, the armed men in the vehicle brandished their firearms menacingly and shouted at other drivers to get out of the way. I was told by our high commissioner that sometimes they even opened fire and killed people to clear the route. Fortunately, no such incident took place during my journey and I felt relieved upon reaching my hotel.

My adventures, however, were far from over. I was taken to the airport in a similar fashion the following morning. The accompanying protocol team took me to the VIP room where I waited until it was time to board the flight. I had a business-class ticket with a reserved seat but when I boarded the aircraft the steward told me that all the seats in the business class were occupied and that I would have to take my seat in the economy class. When I insisted that I had a boarding pass for the business class, I was told that since I had come late to the aircraft my seat had been given to another passenger.

The high commissioner again explained to me that the aircraft crew in Nigeria was free to negotiate such seat arrangements with the passengers for a fee. Prior reservation had no meaning in such a situation. He also told me that things were so bad in the country that even heads of foreign missions had to occasionally bribe the chief of protocol in the foreign office to get a date from the president to present

their credentials. The foreign secretary of South Africa, who had been witness to this drama on board, kindly offered me his seat in the business class, which I politely declined. So, I travelled to Abuja in the economy class instead, only to arrive to a first-class crisis confronting the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth meeting in Abuja started on 5 December 2003 under a great deal of tension. The dominating issue was the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. There was a clear white/non-white divide on the question. The UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada were in favour of throwing Zimbabwe out of the Commonwealth. The African countries were strongly opposed to the move. It appeared as if the Commonwealth would split along racial lines at the meeting. Were the issue not tackled with maturity, it could even spell the end of the Commonwealth.

After discussions among the member countries of the Commonwealth on Zimbabwe, the heads of government agreed to establish a committee consisting of the heads of governments of Australia, Canada, India, Jamaica, Mozambique and South Africa, to examine the issue of Zimbabwe and make recommendations on the way forward to the leaders at their Retreat. The prime minister of Jamaica was the chairman of the committee. Vajpayee deputed me to attend the meetings of the committee on his behalf. I played a vital role in its deliberations, despite being the only foreign minister amongst the heads of state/government.

The committee reaffirmed the importance of supporting and consolidating democracy, ensuring peace and harmony, and promoting development and growth in Zimbabwe. The heads of government, in their final statement after the Retreat, endorsed the committee's recommendations and we were able to save the Commonwealth from certain disintegration. Vajpayee had asked me to accompany him to the Retreat where the resolution was adopted. But it became infructuous because President Mugabe decided, despite the African nations' pleadings to the contrary, to withdraw from the Commonwealth.

The election of the secretary general of the Commonwealth also came up at the Abuja CHOGM. Lakshman Kadirgamar, the former foreign minister of Sri Lanka put up his candidature for the post rather late in the day. The incumbent secretary general Don McKinnon, a former prime minister of New Zealand, was up for a second term. The majority was in favour of status quo, though Mbeki was backing Kadirgamar. I told my Sri Lankan friends that the move to put up Lakshman should have been made months in advance and not at the last moment.

There was no doubt that he was an extremely suitable candidate for the post, and a dear friend of mine, but his candidature was a lost cause *ab initio*. McKinnon was elected for another four-year term with a massive majority. Lakshman was later tragically assassinated in Colombo by the LTTE in August 2005. McKinnon

completed his term and was replaced by India's former high commissioner to London, Kamalesh Sharma, in 2008, who went on to serve for two consecutive terms as well.

One evening, when there was no official engagement in Abuja, both Brajesh Mishra and Ranjan Bhattacharya, who had accompanied Vajpayee, decided to make their own separate plans for the evening. They requested me to give the PM company that evening, which I did with pleasure. Vajpayee was quite forthcoming in our conversation at dinner. In fact, he spoke quite frankly about his relationship with Advani, and its ups and downs, details of which I am choosing to leave out.

Bringing up the announcement he had made before leaving India for Abuja, I remember asking him that evening whether he planned to hold the Lok Sabha elections earlier than scheduled. Rumours to the effect had been rife, following BJP's victory in three out of four state elections that year. Not only was Vajpayee not in favour of bringing the election date forward, he also told me rather bluntly, '*Pagal hue hain ki chunav pahle karayenge*?' (Are we crazy that we would call an early general election?)'

So, a few weeks later, when he did call for elections six months before they were due, he was obviously pressured into doing so by some senior leaders of the BJP who had completely misread the mood of the people. I am sure Vajpayee had been forced to agree reluctantly.

UNGA, 2002

It is customary for the hosting US president to make the first speech on the first day of the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York, as well as host a reception for the visiting heads of state/governments and their foreign ministers. In September 2002, the reception was held in a hall close to Ground Zero, where the twin towers of the World Trade Centre had stood, which was symbolic in its own way.

For me, the visit was memorable in more ways than one. The UNGA meeting offered me an excellent opportunity to meet with my counterparts from around the world, on a truly global stage. As a result, I had an extremely busy schedule throughout my stay in New York. Apart from the meetings that I attended with

Vajpayee and my own bilateral engagements, we made two or three interesting beginnings.

The first was a trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia, China and India that was hosted by the Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov. The idea of the trilateral had been floating around for some years and I was keen for it to materialise as soon as possible. In my informal discussions with Igor, I had suggested that he take the initiative, as the Chinese might have some reservations if I did. It was also a Russian idea, having been floated for the first time by the Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov. The meeting went off well except that soon after it ended, the same Chinese foreign minister, Tang Jiaxuan, departed hastily and through a back door to avoid facing the waiting media. Igor and I had no such reservations in facing the media persons and satisfying their curiosity on the trilateral initiative.

I hosted the trilateral meeting the following year when we met again for the UNGA session in 2003. I am glad that the initiative has blossomed into an annual event among the three countries and that they now meet independent of the UNGA.

My visit to the UNGA in September 2003, along with Vajpayee, was a packed and significant one, overall. An article in *The Telegraph*[19] from that time describes it as:

> In all, Sinha met 20 foreign ministers in New York. Foreign ministers of all the five permanent members of the Security Council sought meetings with their Indian counterpart. He met foreign ministers of eight out of ten non-permanent members of the Council and had discussions with his counterparts from three of the Council's incoming members. He took part in meetings of foreign ministers of the south Asian association for regional cooperation, the group of 77, the Rio group, the non-aligned movement and attended a plenary meeting of the general assembly on AIDS. In a first for India, the Gulf cooperation council foreign ministers asked for a collective meeting with the Indian minister. The foreign secretary, K. Sibal, stood in for the minister at a high-level ad-hoc conclave on Afghanistan. Hoshyar Zebari, a member of Iraq's governing council in charge of foreign policy, met Sinha. Adnan Pachachi, Iraq's most respected leader in the post-Saddam era, spoke at that meeting about his hopes that Iraq's new constitution could draw heavily from the Indian Constitution, a copy of which had been handed over to Pachachi a few days earlier by the Indian ambassador in Baghdad. The best publicized of all such meetings was that of the Commonwealth ministerial action group, because it decided to continue Pakistan's suspension from the Commonwealth. Two things are evident from Sinha's schedule in New York, which was among the busiest for foreign ministers who were in the Big Apple for the general assembly. Firstly, the range and depth of India's involvement in several of the multilateral meetings in New York showed a revived interest on New Delhi's part to return to the roots of its diplomacy, once characterised by its leadership of NAM, its participation in G-77 and its desire to impart substance to the

group of 15 (G-15).

General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and his foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri were also attending the UNGA meeting. I have a few unpleasant memories of their presence. One such incident took place when I was in the middle of a bilateral meeting with the foreign minister of another country in one of the rooms of the UN building. Musharraf was meeting someone else in the adjoining room and talking against India, loudly enough to be clearly heard in our room.

I normally did not bring up Pakistan in my conversations with my counterparts unless they raised the issue first. In this meeting, however, I had no choice but to brief my interlocutor about Pakistan-exported terror, both in the east as well as to the west i.e. both to India and Afghanistan.

An even more disagreeable experience was when Musharraf made a reference to Jammu and Kashmir in his speech to the UNGA. A junior officer of our Mission to the UN replied to this and a Pakistani diplomat took issue with us again by responding further to our officer's reply. And so it often was with Pakistan. Only on rare occasions did we manage to strike a precarious balance with our contentious nieghbour.

An example springs to mind. Pakistan had long been keen to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Its powerful friends in ASEAN were clamouring for it. In the spring of 2004, the then Pakistani foreign minister, Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, with whom I had become reasonably friendly, had called me to support their case. I told him clearly that I would do so on the condition that Pakistan would not use the forum to ever raise bilateral issues. This was acceptable to Kasuri, and Pakistan joined the ARF in July 2004. I wonder if Pakistan has kept the word Kasuri had given me then.

Before that, Powell had also telephoned me to seek my support on the issue and I put the same condition before him, which he also accepted. This was the best I could do then as support for Pakistan's membership had grown and opposing it would only have led to our isolation in the ARF, even as we would be unable to block the move altogether. I remember that I was in the thick of campaigning for the Lok Sabha election in Jharkhand and was visiting Garhwa, a remote district headquarters in the state. Fortunately, the circuit house there had a WLL phone and I remember Powell calling me on it at the appointed time, to discuss the ARF matter. Luckily, we could hear each other clearly.

Later, I was able to tell the audience in my election meetings about this telephone conversation, primarily to emphasise the telecom revolution our government had ushered in. But the people of Jharkhand were unimpressed, and we lost 13 out of the 14 Lok Sabha seats from the state in the 2004 general elections. But more on that later.

CHAPTER 31

A DIPLOMAT AT HOME

Apart from firefighting for India on distant shores, there were some problems that would arise back home and would often require my attention. I faced a somewhat delicate situation within days of my joining the MEA. A recommendation had been made to the PM, by my predecessor Jaswant Singh that Jinnah House in Mumbai should be returned to its 'rightful' owner—Nusli Wadia's sister Dina Wadia, sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The PM had already approved the proposal. When the file came back from the PMO to the foreign secretary, Kanwal Sibal personally brought it to me, saying it would be wrong and indefensible for us to part with the precious property.

Interestingly, the attorney general, Soli Sorabjee, had also given a legal opinion in favour of such a transfer. I agreed with Sibal instead and we decided to take up the matter for reconsideration. I called Soli and asked him for a meeting, where Sibal and I presented our arguments to prove how Nusli Wadia's claim to Jinnah House was not sustainable.

Sibal prepared a note in which he succinctly argued why the property should not be transferred to Dina Wadia. I added my own argument on the file and we asked the PM to reconsider his earlier decision. Vajpayee promptly agreed with our revised recommendation. We heaved a huge sigh of relief on having prevented a great wrong from happening. Nusli had become quite friendly with me when I had taken over as finance minister. The friendship, tenuous as it was, ended for good after this episode.

Another property matter concerned the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the Sapru House property on which it stood. It had been under the control of Harcharan Singh Josh of the Congress party for years. In September 2000, the government took over ICWA and its Sapru House headquarters through a Presidential Ordinance, signed by the then president KR Narayanan, following a Cabinet decision to do so. However, a new legislation was needed to replace the ordinance, and Sapru House was finally freed from the illegal control of Josh when

ICWA was declared an institution of national importance by an Act of Parliament in 2001.

After I became the EAM, I discovered that the Indian Council of World Affairs (Amendment) Bill, 2003, empowering the Centre to appoint the director general of the ICWA, was pending with the Rajya Sabha. The Lower House had already passed it in May 2003, with the Opposition parties staging a walkout.

For its passage in Rajya Sabha, and to reorganise the Council along proper lines, we needed the support of the Congress party. I took up the matter with Manmohan Singh who was the Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha at the time. I offered to visit him to discuss the matter further, but he offered to come over to my place instead, where we discussed the matter over a cup of tea. He did not convey his approval of my proposal immediately but, after a few days and after he had discussed the matter within his party, he told me that the Congress would support the legislation in the House. We brought the Bill to the House and I was happy when it was passed with the support of the Congress party.

Just like in the Ministry of Finance, I had two ministers of state at the MEA as well – Digvijay Singh, the MP from Banka in Bihar and an old friend; and Vinod Khanna, the MP from Ferozepur in Punjab and a famous Bollywood actor. Alas, both are no longer with us.

I took my parliamentary duties very seriously—both in the finance ministry where there was plenty of parliamentary work, and in the MEA where it was not as onerous. I believed in preparing well before facing MPs and their questions in Parliament. So, I was keen for my ministers to fully participate in the work of the ministry and take responsibility for their specific areas. I also wanted them to face Parliament and reply to questions by the MPs. Of the two, I found Digvijay more willing to take on this particular role.

I specifically recall an occasion when there was a starred question that featured quite high on the list and was bound to come up for an oral answer. We had to be prepared for any supplementary questions that might follow. The question referred to action against a Maoist leader from Nepal whom the Indian authorities had arrested and repatriated to that country. A leading newspaper had also carried a story about it that morning.

I brought it to the notice of Digvijay and, since it was a tricky question, asked the joint secretary concerned to help the MoS by giving him a draft reply in writing

in case a supplemantary question was asked. As I had anticipated, a supplementary question was indeed asked by the famous journalist, Kuldip Nayar, who was a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha. Well-prepared as he was, Digvijay read out the draft reply to the satisfaction of the House.

I faced another tricky situation when the then chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, decided to visit Switzerland and the UK in 2003. The proposal was sent to the MEA for examination and for submission to the prime minister for a final decision. We had no problem as far as Switzerland was concerned but our high commissioner in London, Ronen Sen, informed us that there could be a major problem in the UK. A British citizen of Gujarati origin had been killed during the riots in Gujarat in 2002 and his fear was that someone may move a Magistrate's Court in London to arrest Modi during his visit. He warned us that such cases had indeed happened in the past.

This possibility worried us greatly. While we were still thinking about what to do, I received a call from Modi. He expressed his unhappiness at the delay in the approval of the proposal. After his call, I went personally to Vajpayee, explained the entire situation to him and suggested that the risk was worth taking. We decided to approve the proposal and hope for the best. Fortunately, his visit went off without a hitch, and yet another calculated risk of mine paid off.

Dealing with the PMO

Brajesh Mishra was Vajpayee's closest confidant. Yet Vajpayee never accepted his advice blindly. For example, Mishra was very keen that Kanwal Sibal get an extension as the foreign secretary, as he was due to retire at the end of November 2003. Vajpayee was not. During one of our trips abroad, Brajesh asked me to take up the matter with the PM and throw my weight behind Sibal's extension as well.

As for me, I liked Sibal. He was an extremely competent officer and adhered to high ethical standards. So, I spoke to Vajpayee privately, but he firmly told me that he was not in favour of the extension and that we should look for a replacement. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he added that we need not agree to every proposal of Brajesh's. I got the message and started processing the proposal to replace Sibal with Shashank, the senior-most officer in the foreign service after Sibal. To this

day, I do not know why Vajpayee rejected our proposal to give Sibal an extension.

The MEA's relationship with the PMO has always been a matter of great interest and speculation in the media and elsewhere. Jawahar Lal Nehru kept the external affairs portfolio with himself and, ever since then, the PM and his office have taken more interest in the functioning of the MEA than any other ministry perhaps. I can certainly vouch for the fact that the PMO did not take as much interest in the Ministry of Finance as it did in the MEA, at least while I served in the two ministries.

The appointment of a national security advisor brought the PMO directly in the realm of foreign policy. The NSA, in every country where such a post exists, plays a key role in foreign policy formulation. In our country, the director of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) reported directly to the NSA and took instructions from him. The EAM was kept informed, could offer his advice and counsel but was not in charge of the R&AW. The proximity of the NSA to the PM also gave the former added importance, especially in the eyes of foreigners.

Yet, the arrangement was subject to the equation between the NSA and the EAM and the relative confidence of the PM that each enjoyed. Since Brajesh Mishra combined the post of principal secretary to the PM with that of NSA, he was naturally regarded as very powerful. And he was. However, Vajpayee made sure that his confidence was not monopolised by Mishra.

There were several matters that were almost the exclusive preserve of the PMO and yet had a direct bearing on foreign policy. Defence, defence procurement and other strategic issues were generally dealt with by the PMO and the defence ministry. The MEA was kept informed of important developments but did not play an active or direct role. Similarly, nuclear issues were dealt with by the PMO and the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE). For example, civil nuclear cooperation and nuclear safety issues formed part of the strategic dialogue with the US but their various aspects were dealt with directly by the PMO. Visiting foreign ministers would invariably call on the NSA as well.

My own relationship with Vajpayee was not a very close one while I was in the finance ministry. The MEA brought me closer to him because we spent a lot of time together, especially during our travels abroad. These trips out of the country also brought me closer to Brajesh. I cannot recall an occasion where I had any serious differences with Brajesh, especially on policy matters. As a result, we managed to get along well together and did not create any problems for Vajpayee. To his credit, Brajesh gave me the respect that was due and never tried to upstage me. I too did not mind his proximity to Vajpayee nor the role he had to play in his twin capacities as NSA and as principal secretary to the PM.

However, the entire terrain of this relationship is tricky, to say the least.

Depending on the confidence of the PM that the external affairs minister enjoys, he can either function as a full-fledged EAM, or as a mere minister of state. At worst, he can be reduced to the level of a non-entity in the ministry. I shall leave it at that and refrain from commenting on the current situation in the MEA.

Economic Diplomacy

During my tenure in the MEA, I tried to increase its visibility in economic and trade matters. I can say, with confidence, that I did more external economic work in the MEA than I did in the Ministry of Finance. The logic was simple. When I looked at bilateral trade figures between India and other countries, especially the developing countries of Asia, Africa and South America, I noticed that we stood nowhere in comparison to China. For example, if our bilateral trade with Country 'X' was, say, USD 30 million, China's would be USD 300 million. So, the subject of bilateral trade formed a very important part of my interactions with other foreign ministers.

My experience in the commerce ministry and in Germany as a civil servant came in handy in these discussions. I could clearly identify areas where an increase in trade was possible. Similarly, as far as India's aid to other developing countries was concerned, I brought about a seminal shift. Apart from spending our limited resources on educational scholarships, food aid and other technical assistance programmes, I ensured that we made an emphatic statement with large and visible projects as well. The completion of the Salma dam and the construction of the Parliament building in Kabul fell in this category.

I distinctly remember a visit I made to Mauritius. The then deputy prime minister of Mauritius, Paul Bérenger, had organised a dinner for me during which he raised the issue of India's help in the construction of a convention centre in his country. Mauritius had agreed to play host to the 'International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States' and badly needed to construct a suitable venue.

Bérenger was pleasantly surprised when I told him that India would build the entire convention centre for them. In fact, he almost didn't believe me! The most he had expected was the commitment of some financial assistance for this purpose.

On my return, I sent a note to finance minister Jaswant Singh, who promptly accepted my proposal and we went ahead and constructed the convention centre in the capital Port Louis, and Mauritius successfully played host to the Conference in 2005.

After this, word went around that India was willing to take up such high-value and prestigious projects as well. Sam Hinds, the prime minister of Guyana, approached me during a multilateral meeting and asked me to construct a cricket stadium for them. The West Indies were to host the 2007 World Cup matches and the existing stadium in Guyana's city of Providence was inadequate for such an international tournament. I agreed immediately, and India built the stadium in time for the World Cup matches.

Similarly, during delegation-level talks at a bilateral meeting in Laos, the host prime minister mentioned to Vajpayee that the repayment of a loan, which India had given it earlier, was becoming an onerous burden for them. He asked whether we would consider rescheduling the debt and make repayment terms easier. As the sum involved was only USD 2 million, I whispered to Vajpayee to offer writing off the entire loan amount. Vajpayee responded by making this announcement, which pleased our hosts immensely.

Such gestures – in Mauritius, Afghanistan and Guyana – also created business opportunities for various Indian firms that were involved in construction work.

Our prowess in the field of information technology was well acknowledged by then and we freely offered to assist other countries in this field as well. Apart from that, I would invariably take up the issue of the export of Indian pharmaceutical products in discussions with my foreign counterparts. But economic diplomacy was not my only concern; I was equally interested in some other 'minor' concerns while in the MEA.

The Primacy of Protocol

I strongly believe that reciprocity in protocol matters is an important instrument of diplomacy. So, while, I insisted on the niceties of protocol during my official visits abroad, I also made sure that we did not extend more than our share of courtesy to any visiting dignitaries over and above what we received in their respective

countries. I used to feel extremely unhappy when our people, including in the media, exhibited a mindset that showed subservience, which was completely unacceptable to me.

For example, when it came to visitors from western countries, the media would show a great deal of interest in the visits but a more important (or senior) visitor from a developing country often failed to receive similar attention. I remember how, during a visit of the foreign minister of Burundi, whom I had received in Hyderabad House, the only photographer present – as we shook hands in front of our national flags – was one from Doordarshan.

Similarly, I recall the visit of the head of government of a very important country from Africa. As per protocol, I had gone to call on him at Rashtrapati Bhawan where he was staying. When I returned to my South Block office, I noticed a large media contingent waiting near the gate. I felt happy at the interest the media was showing in the visit of this important guest. Much to my surprise, however, the media showed no inclination in talking to me, and looked away as if they had not noticed me as I alighted from my car and walked past them into the building.

Once inside, I enquired who they had been waiting for, only to be told that it was for the assistant secretary of the US State Department, a joint-secretary level official no less, who was calling on her counterpart in the ministry. Later that day, the TV channels were full of news about her visit and the following day's newspapers carried lead stories about it as well. The presence of a more important, higher-level and perhaps more useful, visitor from Africa was completely ignored.

Clearly, this mindset is a national weakness that afflicts many in our country. Is it a colonial hangover, I wonder, or the result of our deep-rooted racial prejudice? I'm afraid I still do not have an answer to that.

Luckily, though, there are parts of the government machinery that are quite adept at recording events, often doing so quite diligently, and these can provide a lot of material to keener observers.

I have given a lot of speeches, both in the finance and external affairs ministries, as well as interviews to the media both at home and abroad. Unfortunately, the MoF speeches and media interactions are not available in one place, but in the MEA there is a very healthy tradition of collating all speeches and interactions of the EAM and publishing them at the end of each year. All my speeches and media interactions are duly recorded in two volumes by the MEA.

During the twenty-three months that I spent at the helm of the MEA, I travelled extensively, often with my wife. The visits to many of the lesser-explored countries in Central Asia and South America were particularly interesting. Many have stayed with me as cherished memories over the years. During a visit to Cambodia and Indonesia, for example, I fulfilled a lifelong wish to see some of the wonders of the

world like Angkor Vat and Borobudur, respectively. The visit to Bali, with its overtones of Hindu culture, and to Yogyakarta – where we saw the Ramayan Ballet performed by Muslim artistes against the backdrop of three Hindu temples – was an out-of-the-world experience.

As I had mentioned earlier, my visit to Venezuela where I met with Hugo Chavez, was perhaps my last trip abroad as the EAM of India. After my return, I devoted myself entirely to the election campaign in my constituency and elsewhere.

MoF versus MEA

A question I have often been asked is that, of the two ministries that I've headed, which one have I enjoyed more? Without hesitation, my answer is the MEA. The Ministry of Finance is clearly the most important ministry in the Government of India, with its finger in veritably every pie. It gives you an overview that no other ministry of the Indian government can. As I was fond of saying while I was there, it involved looking at the sky for the monsoon clouds and interacting with the farmers, on the one hand, while sitting at the global high table to discuss the mysteries of global finance, on the other. In its range and depth, the Ministry of Finance is unparalleled.

It was my misfortune, however, that in both my stints at the finance ministry—first under Chandra Shekhar and later under Vajpayee—I had to deal with unprecedented challenges and crises both domestic and global, as well as natural and man-made. I also made some powerful enemies and very few friends.

In the MEA, the pace was more relaxed, the challenges fewer and more manageable. Being the EAM was also more of a shared responsibility with the prime minister and his office. Travels to exotic destinations, undeniably, added spice to life in the ministry, even as shaking hands and breaking bread with world leaders added a generous dash of glamour to the job.

I am just lucky to have been a part of both and having worked with some wonderful ministerial colleagues and bureaucrats.

PART VII

TO THE STATE AND BACK

CHAPTER 32

BACK TO THE STATE

Voting in my constituency, Hazaribagh, was held in April 2004. After that I made myself available to campaign for the party elsewhere in the country. I remember travelling to various places in other states to garner votes for my colleagues.

I also campaigned extensively in Jharkhand. The president of the party, Venkaiah Naidu, had appointed me as the convener of the state election campaign committee and I played an important role in that capacity in organising the campaign in Jharkhand.

An interesting situation arose when I got a call from the party office in Delhi to participate in a programme organised by FICCI in Delhi, to discuss the respective economic policies of the BJP and Congress. The Congress was to be represented by Pranab Mukherjee and the party wanted me to come to Delhi to represent the BJP. Though I had moved to the MEA, the party still felt that I should speak for it in this discussion. Given my busy schedule, the party even arranged a special aircraft to fly me from Ranchi to Delhi and back to enable me to participate in this programme.

The hall in the FICCI building was full of leading businessmen from around the country, with FICCI's secretary general Amit Mitra as the master of ceremonies. With Pranab Mukherjee on the other side, the discussion was held in a very cordial and civilised manner. There was no shouting, cross talk or insulting remarks, things that have become the bane of most TV discussions these days.

An interesting situation arose when, during the discussion, Pranab Mukherjee referred to me as the finance minister of the NDA government. I quickly corrected him and reminded him that I was the external affairs minister and not the finance minister any longer! At this Pranab Mukherjee remarked innocently, and with a smile, that he hoped that I would become the finance minister again after the elections. Quick to jump on that good-natured remark, I replied equally light-heartedly that the Congress spokesperson had already conceded defeat and was

expecting us to retain power.

In fact, Pranab Mukherjee was perhaps not alone in thinking that the NDA would return to power. The media thought so as well, even as the diplomatic corps in Delhi believed it. Most people seemed to have expected it. My own party workers in Hazaribagh were only concerned about the margin of my victory; victory itself was never in doubt. Yet, I campaigned as hard as I could, meeting people in remote parts of my constituency while mobilising party workers to play their part.

As I had mentioned earlier, ever since my joining the BJP, a ginger group in Hazaribagh had always been opposed to me. It included some influential local-level leaders. Three out of the five MLAs in my constituency belonged to the BJP. While externally they pledged support to me, my information revealed that they were clandestinely working to ensure my defeat.

An influential national leader of the party also conspired toward my eventual defeat. According to information conveyed to me by friends in Mumbai, he had even sent a large sum of money to a rival candidate in Hazaribagh to ensure his victory and my defeat. To add to my woes, all the major political parties in Jharkhand had united to fight the BJP one-on-one. I was up against the CPI candidate, Bhubneshwar Prasad Mehta, who had already been elected to the Lok Sabha once – in 1991. The Congress and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) had not fielded any candidates and were supporting Mehta instead. All these factors made it a tough election.

While my performance as EAM was not in question, things that had happened when I was finance minister were certainly spun into huge issues by my opponents. A large part of my constituency represented industry and coal mining. The reduction in interest rates on provident fund deposits and the tax on perquisites were played up as personal sins that I had committed. The increase in the price of kerosene oil was also an issue in the rural areas.

April is a hot month in Jharkhand. Shortage of drinking water had already become a problem in many parts of the constituency. There were other local issues as well. To add to people's distress we were talking about things like 'feel good' and 'India Shining'. I had a good relationship with the Muslim community in my constituency. They insisted on my visiting their villages and *mohallas* whenever I was out campaigning. This did not go down well with the Hindu community on many occasions. In the end, while I did not get the Muslim votes, my 'secular' credentials certainly cost me a large chunk of Hindu votes as well. My workers had also become complacent.

As the campaign progressed, it became increasingly clear to me that I did not enjoy the same popular support as I had during the earlier elections. The day of

voting was a complete mess. My workers were not present in many booths and my opponents had a free run with bogus voting and even booth capturing. In many booths where BJP workers were present, they proved to be disloyal under the influence of some local leader or another and even encouraged people to vote against me. I discovered this personally in some booths around the city. People told me after the polling was over that the election had not gone in my favour. Yet, I was reluctant to believe that I was actually going to lose the election. I still believed that, even though the margin of victory might eventually turn out to be slim, victory would still be mine.

However, once counting began, I started trailing badly from round one. I was losing in four out of the five assembly segments. It was only in the Hazaribagh assembly segment that I had a respectable lead. When it became clear that Mehta's lead over me had become unassailable, I decided to leave the counting hall. A large crowd of Mehta's supporters and my opponents had already assembled outside, as word was out that he had established an unbeatable lead over me and was going to win the election. The crowd was already cheering for him. When the crowd saw me in my car, it got even more excited, banged on my vehicle while gesticulating aggressively, and even abusing me in rather filthy language.

Politics is not always a game of cricket. When you lose an election, unlike after a game of cricket, your opponents do not shake your hand politely. I will never forget that scene or the humiliation of the defeat I suffered that day.

The BJP lost the 2004 election and went out of power after successfully completing a full term. The officers of the MEA organised a warm farewell for me. But I was still smarting from the defeat the party had suffered and, even more acutely, my personal defeat in the election.

It was a shock from which I have never recovered.

On my return to Delhi, I had to start worrying about mundane matters like where we would live after vacating the 6, Kushak Road bungalow and other such issues. While I was so engrossed I got a call from the party president Venkaiah Naidu, asking me to meet him at the party office. When I arrived there, he bluntly told me that the party was not going to give me a Rajya Sabha seat.

Shocked beyond words at this abrupt admonition, I blurted out, 'But when did I ask for one?' He replied, 'All those who have lost the Lok Sabha elections are asking for a Rajya Sabha berth, some from Madhya Pradesh, some from Gujarat,

but we have decided not to give Rajya Sabha seats to the Lok Sabha losers.' To this I said, 'Venkaiahji, I am already in a state of grief after losing the Lok Sabha election. I was not even thinking of Rajya Sabha in this state of mind. But now that you have brought up the subject, let me tell you that there is a Rajya Sabha seat that our party can win from Jharkhand. I am not asking you to give me a seat from any other state, but I see no reason why I should not be considered for a seat from Jharkhand?'

He was unimpressed and stuck to his point of view. This was a further blow to my morale after the Lok Sabha defeat and I could not figure out why Venkaiah had decided to subject me to this further humiliation.

From the party office I went straight to Vajpayee, without an appointment. He met me immediately, and I told him about my conversation with Venkaiah. I added that I was deeply upset at the way the message had been conveyed to me. He listened to me in silence, without revealing what he was thinking. I later learnt that in the meeting of the election committee, it was his one-liner that finally won the day for the 'Lok Sabha losers'.

When Venkaiah said that under the rules of the party, losers could not be accommodated in the Rajya Sabha, Vajpayee asked him, nonchalantly, 'When was this rule made?' This opened the way for Murli Manohar Joshi, who had also lost the Lok Sabha election, and me to become the party's candidates from our respective states of UP and Jharkhand.

My troubles, however, did not end with the nomination. A powerful businessman from Delhi, belonging to the BJP, who had the support of some senior leaders of the party, decided to throw his hat in the ring as an independent candidate from Jharkhand – on the strength of the surplus votes of the BJP. The state had always been a favourite hunting ground for rich and ambitious business tycoons interested in a Rajya Sabha seat. This was bound to queer the pitch for me because the sale and purchase of votes was sure to affect the loyalty of my voters also, especially as the assembly elections were around the corner, and ruin my chances of victory despite being the official candidate of the party.

The Rajya Sabha elections offered an attractive opportunity for MLAs to collect funds for their own election, and such sale and purchase of MLAs was common practice. It was with great difficulty that I could persuade the party leadership not to encourage this gentleman to contest the election as an independent candidate. Once the issue was settled, only two nominations were filed for the two seats from Jharkhand. We were both declared elected unopposed, after the last date of the withdrawal of nominations, and I heaved a great sigh of relief.

Since the Rajya Sabha elections were held in June, I was not forced to vacate my Kushak Road bungalow. Later, with the intervention of the then vice president

of India, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, also the ex-officio chairman of Rajya Sabha, I was able to retain my house and life continued as before.

Hazaribagh is a difficult Lok Sabha constituency. I have already described in detail why and how I came to choose Hazaribagh in 1984. It is a huge constituency, spread over a wide area, which abounds in diversity. A part of the constituency is entirely rural and agricultural, while another part is made up of industrial and mining areas. Hazaribagh and Ramgarh are its two important towns. The constituency is spread over such a large area that it is neither easy nor quick to visit all its panchayats and villages. There are some parts that I have not visited till now, I must confess, despite my long association with the constituency. Besides, the caste composition of its population is also not helpful for a Kayastha candidate, who starts with a disadvantage as he does not have a major vote bank.

Of late, the Naxal movement has also introduced violence, uncertainty and a restriction on free movement into an already complex mix. The famous Grand Trunk Road or National Highway No. 2 passes through the constituency as do some other national highways. Until 2014, Hazaribagh was not even connected by rail and is generally considered a backward part of the country. But it is a beautiful place with its hills, forests and vales. It has a good climate and I remember the time you could do without a fan, even during the peak of summer. When I was in the civil service, I had always wanted to settle down in Hazaribagh.

Though I had lost the first-ever Lok Sabha election that I had contested from Hazaribagh in 1984, rather miserably I might add, I had decided not to forsake the place but to adopt it as my home instead. I stayed in an inspection bungalow during the election. Later, my wife and I, on our visits to Hazaribagh, would stay with some distant relatives or friends, often in almost primitive conditions with no running water or even an electric fan. But we kept going back.

My brother-in-law Siddheshwar Prasad, who lived in my Rajendra Nagar house in Patna, had an old Ambassador car. I used to borrow it to travel to Hazaribagh and within the constituency. It would break down and the sight of us pushing it on the highways became quite a familiar one. Once, the rear wheel of the car came off and went hurtling into a nearby field. Fortunately, it did not result in a major accident. However, my love for my constituency has always outstripped these minor hardships and mishaps.

To familiarise myself with the constituency, and to convince its people that I was there to stay, I also rented a house on the outskirts of the town. It was a small house in a poor condition, but we made ourselves as comfortable as possible in it. I remember Nilima often sweeping the rooms with a broom, or washing clothes, as we had no regular help. For the daughter of an ICS officer, I must say that her attitude has always been humble.

Deepak Sinha, an unusually talented young man who had lost half an arm in an accident, had become quite attached to me over time. He offered to live with us and look after the small and austere household during our absence. With his remaining arm and a half, he could do everything, which included driving a motorcycle and car.

He was a spirited lad full of enthusiasm and courage though he could often be a little rash. He was of immense help to me in the beginning of my stay in Hazaribagh, Subsequently, I helped him get a domestic cooking gas agency. He even got married in the temple built on our premises in Demotand and settled down to a comfortable life in his own house. However, like many others in Hazaribagh, he drifted away from me over time. He was later killed in a road accident in Hazaribagh, much to my regret and shock.

Hazaribagh also sprang a few surprises from time to time—some of them not quite pleasant—and life in the constituency was quite eventful. During one of my trips there, after the fateful election of 1984, I was surprised when people I met started enquiring about my release from prison. 'But I never went to jail!' was my surprised reply. Further enquiries revealed that a few newspapers had carried the news of one Jaswant Singh, another government employee, who had been arrested on corruption charges and sent to jail. The people of Hazaribagh lost no time in concluding that I was the very same Jaswant Singh—a corrupt official who had decided to leave the service because he was about to be prosecuted. In fact, some of them were even disappointed to discover that I was not the corrupt official who had gone to jail!

I would go to jail many times, in later years for public causes, but more on that later.

During my early years in politics, I was fond of *padyatras* (marches) a public outreach technique I had learnt from Chandra Shekhar. I undertook many *padyatras* in Hazaribagh. One of them was in the Bishnugarh block, in October 1985, within a year of my electoral setback. We drove to a place called Banaso in my brother-in-law's Ambassador, reaching there in the evening. There were five others who had accompanied me – a motley crew of followers from Hazaribagh.

My IAS background enabled us to secure accommodation in the irrigation department's inspection bungalow in Banaso. I asked my friends to go out to eat and bring something back for me. They returned with a simple fare of *roti*, *sabzi*

and *dal*. Though I complimented them on the quality of the food, especially the dal, I was surprised to notice their reluctance to take credit for it. I later learnt that even though the shopkeeper had told them the *dal* was stale, they had brought it thinking that mere *roti* and *sabzi* would not be enough for me. So, they felt especially relieved when I praised the *dal*. Perhaps it tasted better because it was stale, I told them, and we had a hearty laugh about it. Such was our life on the road.

We could not find any local party worker to guide us through our *padyatra* and were at a loss regarding the direction to take. During their visit to the market, my friends had come across a person who claimed to know the entire area like the back of his hand. Krantikari Mustafa, as his name suggests, was quite a colourful character but did not belong to our party. Yet, when he heard about me and my background he decided to offer his help by accompanying us.

We accepted his kind offer, which made our *padyatra* truly memorable. We visited many villages in the distant hills and jungles where we interacted with people, and I meticulously noted down their problems. Later, I submitted them to the local block development officer who, much to my dismay, did nothing about them. However, Krantikari Mustafa became a friend for life, even though he never joined any of the parties that I belonged to—from time to time—in my political journey.

I went on a similar *padyatra* in the Katkamsandi block of the district. The block headquarters is less than 20 kilometres from Hazaribagh town. Perhaps it is for this reason that it does not have a rest house or an inspection bungalow. My friends and I spent the night in a 'chandsi dawakhana' (an indigenous-medicines pharmacy). The owner had kindly made the front room, where medicines were stored and which served as his clinic, available for us. I slept on a bench while the rest of my friends slept on the floor. In the morning, we had to go out in the fields to relieve ourselves. Our stay there was quite a unique experience.

We started our *padyatra* early in the morning and walked to a village called Dato. We met with a few people there, including the former *mukhiya* (community head) of the village who belonged to the Communist Party of India. We also visited some of the other villages and collected information on their development needs, which I duly passed on to the local administration through a letter. Again, without much impact. I specially remember the trip because, in subsequent years, this area was badly affected by left-wing extremism and it became quite unsafe to go there. Regrettably, I could not visit Dato even when I campaigned for the 1998 and 1999 elections.

After 1999, some people from the village came to see me, recalling my *padyatra* and expressing disappointment that I had not visited the village since then. I also felt ashamed that despite winning two elections, I had not found time to

revisit the place. So, I decided to go there again. When I mentioned my desire to the district authorities, they were aghast and strongly advised me not to indulge in such a misadventure. The area had become quite unsafe by then, and there had been some unpleasant incidents of violence in the days preceding my planned visit. Even the Intelligence Bureau (IB) advised me against the visit. However, I was determined to go and instructed my friends to mobilise as many workers and vehicles as they could to accompany us on the trip.

As a result, we went to Dato in a huge convoy of private as well as *sarkari* vehicles. The villagers gave me a grand all-party welcome, led by the former *mukhiya* belonging to the CPI. The older ones recalled my last visit to the village when I had walked there. They even showed me the place where I had sat on a big boulder to chat with them. In the large public meeting that followed, I talked about the futility of violence in a democracy and appealed to the 'jungle people' (as the left-wing extremists were known) to join the mainstream. I was very happy to visit the village again and returned content and fully convinced about the usefulness of my visit.

A few weeks later, the same village *mukhiya* who had played a key role during my visit, was murdered by the left-wing extremists, his only fault being that he had presided over the public meeting organised for me. No harm was done to me then or later, perhaps because I was adequately protected, but the killing of the *mukhiya* was a tragic and disturbing incident that still haunts me, much like the murder of the *mukhiya* who had supported me at Dumka during my altercation with the chief minister. Unfortunately, incidents like these have become disturbingly frequent.

On another occasion, my wife was visiting a remote village to donate computers to some schools that had requested them. While she was away, we learnt that some left-wing extremists had attacked a village located on the road she was to take on her return. We tried to warn her but were unable to make contact. Tense and worried, I was greatly relieved when she reached home safely a few hours later. She informed us that she had passed the village only a few minutes before the violent attack.

Similar news about Naxalite activity often reached us from other affected villages. In fact, a village in our neighbourhood, just on the edge of a dense forest, was often visited by them. Local newspapers were full of incidents of Naxal violence. My wife, realising that there was a lack of awareness about the dangers of such Naxal violence in places like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, wrote a novel titled *Red Blooms in the Forest* based on the volatile situation in the area. The book received due recognition later, being discussed by a panel led by Vamsee Juluri at the 2014 Jaipur Literary Festival.

Despite all my collective efforts, and the hard work put in by my wife as well,

returns were always slow in coming. Voters, in general, are not easy to satisfy and expect elected representatives to solve all their problems. They make no distinction between a ward commissioner, a panchayat member, a *mukhiya*, an MLA or MP. They expect their MPs to devote their entire time and energy in solving small and minor local problems.

Unable to distinguish between the duties to be performed by the elected representatives at various levels, they complain bitterly about their '*nali, gali aur bijli*' (drain, bylane and electricity) whenever any representative cares to visit them. They also remain completely unimpressed by your performance in parliament, in government as a minister, or by your position in national politics. They are concerned only about their immediate local and personal problems and whether you are willing or able to solve them.

I have already mentioned that the Grand Trunk Road or NH-2 passed through the Hazaribagh Lok Sabha constituency. It was widened to four lanes under the National Highway Development Programme (NHDP) while we were in government and was improved beyond recognition. During the 2004 elections, I travelled along this highway to visit an adjoining village. The villagers told me bluntly that I had done nothing for them. I proudly pointed to the four-lane highway and asked them whether that was not development. They said perhaps it was but that it was of no use to them. Instead, they pointed out that their village road had not been improved, the village pond had not been deepened and many other village works had not been done.

They were not wrong in their complaint. I soon found that most, if not all, BJP MPs whose constituencies fell along the Grand Trunk Road from Bengal to Punjab, had lost the election in 2004. So much for the electoral impact of the most-talked-about development project of the Vajpayee government!

According to me, there are three types of MPs. The first group consists of the top-most leaders of various political parties who belong to the stratosphere. They may visit their constituencies only rarely, may not even have a permanent establishment there, may or may not be available to the constituents when needed, but are always re-elected because they are stars in the political firmament. The second set consists of MPs who are permanently are ready in their constituencies, are always available to the people and ready to accompany them to the local police station or block office to get their work done. They visit Delhi only to attend sessions of parliament or its committees – for the allowance it involves – and their contribution to parliamentary work is negligible but their constituents do not mind it and re-elect them nonetheless.

The worst of the lot falls into the third category, who hang like a 'Trishanku'[20] between their constituency and Parliament. They are mid-level leaders who take

their parliamentary duties seriously or they may even be ministers in the government and, therefore, are not available in the constituency on a 24x7 basis, comparing poorly with the local MLA as a result. They may get major development work done but are neither available to go to the police station nor to meet any other local officer when their constituents need them. Such MPs generally leave the people in their constituency dissatisfied and unhappy.

Perception counts for a lot. Complaints like 'I went to your place and you did not meet me'; 'you were not polite to me and did not listen to me'; 'you did not do my work'; 'you were not available to us when we needed you'; or 'you did not get my son a job' are the kind you hear when the time comes for taking stock. I was under the mistaken belief that I had graduated to the first category by 2004 and could not be defeated. I was wrong; I never moved above category three.

I did my best for Hazaribagh but that was often not enough. Most of us have our limitations—no one can satisfy everyone, do all the work that needs to be done or meet all the demands that are, in any case, endless. Yet, all of us tend to promise the moon whenever we go campaigning, not realising that, as MPs, we have no administrative powers and our capacity for change is limited to the influence we can wield on concerned officials. If an official decides not to cooperate, there is little an MP can do.

Despite serving in the IAS, I must admit that on many occasions I have failed to carry conviction with the administration and persuade it to do things that were in the public interest. Even as a minister in the central government I have had the same experience. Things become even more difficult if the state government belongs to another political party or formation, or if the chief minister belonging to your own party is not well-disposed toward you.

Every MP faces the existential question of dividing his or her time between the constituency and other parliamentary duties outside of it. Very few can strike the right balance.

CHAPTER 33

IN THE OPPOSITION

Despite the setback of 2004, I did not give up on Hazaribagh. I could not. It was home for me and I was determined to win from there again. So, during my Rajya Sabha tenure, I continued to nurture Hazaribagh by visiting the constituency regularly and trying to contribute to its development in whatever way I could.

When I was finance minister, the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and the Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBEC) had both opened training centres in Hazaribagh for the training of their Class II and Class III employees. The Government of India had even acquired land to permanently set up these training institutions in Hazaribagh. They may have done so to please me, but the decision was not taken under any pressure from me.

However, when the UPA government came to power and P. Chidambaram became the finance minister, it was decided to shift the training centres away from Hazaribagh. I was very disappointed to hear this and wrote a letter to Chidambaram suggesting that the training centres not be shifted out of Hazaribagh. I even spoke to him and sought a meeting. I had expected him to invite me to his place for a cup of tea to discuss the matter. I was in for a rude shock.

Chidambaram informed me that in two or three days' time he would come to Rajya Sabha for the Question Hour and I could meet him in the lobby after that. I met him, no doubt, but it turned out to be a perfunctory meeting with many MPs vying for his attention. Chidambaram paid very little attention to what I said, with the result that nothing happened, and the centres were moved out of Hazaribagh.

I could not take the apparent snub lying down. I persuaded my party colleagues in Hazaribagh to launch a serial movement, for at least a week, against the Government of India. The plan was that our workers from the various blocks would come to Hazaribagh, sit on a dharna in front of GOI offices of which there were quite a few in Hazaribagh, and try to disrupt their functioning. We did it successfully for a few days.

After this, even though Arjun Munda of the BJP was the chief minister of

Jharkhand, I was arrested along with my party colleagues and sent to jail. Since the central jail was already overcrowded, my supporters and I were lodged in a special jail set up for us in the stadium at Hazaribagh. I refused to come out on bail and chose to remain incarcerated.

Babulal Marandi, who was still with the BJP, visited me in this makeshift prison. We decided that the time was ripe for us to extend the movement, enforce a blockade in Jharkhand under which we would not permit essential raw materials like coal and iron ore to move out of the state. A detailed plan was chalked out toward this end. The CM did not like it and, feeling uneasy about it, must have complained to the BJP president Rajnath Singh because the latter called me to say that a blockade could lead to the dismissal of the Arjun Munda government and the imposition of President's Rule in Jharkhand.

This fear was completely unfounded but was used as an excuse to force me to come out of jail. Rajnath Singh told me that Arjun Munda had already taken up the issue of the training centres with the PM and assured me that the entire party would back me on the issue.

Both assertions turned out to be completely false.

Arjun Munda never took up the matter with the PM and the party forgot about it as soon as I came out of jail. Much to my shock and surprise, the question of my incarceration was not even raised by my party colleagues in the Rajya Sabha that was in session. Even when my friend, Digvijay Singh of Banka, raised it in the House it received only lukewarm support from the BJP members. Thus, my struggle for saving the *samman* (honour) of Hazaribagh ended in a fiasco largely because of the indifference of the chief minister and the central leadership's uncooperative attitude. A golden opportunity to embarrass the UPA government was thus lost.

The *samman* of the party also suffered a heavy blow during the first few months of the UPA government. Both Houses of Parliament had been getting disrupted for one reason or another during the 2004 Budget Session, which was held in July-August that year, and it appeared unlikely that the Finance Bill would be discussed in Parliament before its passing. Advani felt that our point of view on the Finance Bill should not go unrepresented, so he asked me to prepare a detailed note containing our suggestions on it, which could be presented to the government in writing. I prepared a draft that was finalised after discussion in the core group of the parliamentary party and with the leaders of the NDA.

We asked for time from prime minister Manmohan Singh and a high-powered delegation led by Advani – and including George Fernandes, Jaswant Singh, Murli Manohar Joshi and me, among others – met him in his parliament office. George, as the convener of the NDA, presented the memorandum to Manmohan Singh on

behalf of the NDA. The PM refused to even look at it and literally threw the paper back at George. His curt reply was, 'If you do not allow Parliament to discuss the Finance Bill, what is the use of giving your views in this manner?' Manmohan Singh's response was quite unlike him and, therefore, equally unexpected. It left us shocked beyond words and we left in a huff. The pitch for any future cooperation between the ruling coalition and the main Opposition had been irreparably queered.

Notwithstanding the responsibility given to me by Advani to draft the NDA's memorandum on the Finance Bill, my defeat in the 2004 election provided a golden opportunity to my detractors in the party to get even with me. I have already described how Venkaiah Naidu tried to keep me out of Rajya Sabha and how, even when I was nominated as a candidate, there was a conspiracy to imperil my election.

On joining the Rajya Sabha, I faced the same apathy. Jaswant Singh was the leader of the party in the Upper House, with Sushma Swaraj as the deputy leader. Advani continued to be the leader of the entire parliamentary party. Singh took very little interest in the affairs of the party in the Rajya Sabha and depended entirely on Sushma Swaraj. As did Advani.

My expectation was that when it came to issues pertaining to the economy or foreign policy, the party would give me an opportunity to speak in the House. In the beginning, I was even denied that opportunity. Murli Manohar Joshi participated in the debate on the Budget and Sushma herself spoke on the nuclear deal. I was not even considered for heading a Parliamentary committee. It appeared to me that there was a silent conspiracy at work to marginalise me. There was no court of appeal and I was condemned to suffer in silence.

Deal or no Deal?

The Indo-US nuclear deal was inked during the visit of PM Manmohan Singh to Washington in July 2005. When news of the deal broke, a meeting was held at Vajpayee's residence to discuss its implications for India. Advani, Jaswant Singh, Rajnath Singh, Arun Shourie, Brajesh Mishra and I attended the meeting. It was decided that such a deal was not in India's interest and that we should oppose it. This continued to be the party line throughout the period we remained in the

Opposition. But it changed dramatically when we came to power in 2014.

In the first debate on the nuclear deal, held in Rajya Sabha during the Monsoon Session of 2005 soon after prime minister Manmohan Singh returned to India, the party did not give me an opportunity to initiate the debate. Instead, Sushma Swaraj took the responsibility upon herself, noting that the deal was a 'great, big blunder', saying '*Duniya mandi zoran noon, lakh laanat hai kamzoran noon*' (The world bows before the powerful, while nobody even listens to the weak. Shame be upon them.) At the end of her speech, she thundered, 'Sardar Manmohan Singhji, I will [sic] to tell that if you wish to maintain your name in the world, maintain the power and capability that we maintained. Don't destroy that capability, otherwise the future generations will not only curse and make you but also us the target of their sarcastic flings.'[21]

As for me, realising that the party was not going to give me the opportunity to air my views in Parliament, I decided to write articles on the deal in newspapers. I sent them to some of the important dailies, but none were prepared to publish them. Ultimately, I found a host for my articles in *The Asian Age*, edited by MJ Akbar. He shared our misgivings on the deal and published a series of my articles on the subject in his newspaper, along with other writers' opinions as well. The articles did generate awareness about the deal both within the leadership of the party and outside of it. I soon emerged as an authoritative and knowledgeable voice against the deal.[22]

Within the party, I received strong support from Arun Shourie, along with Digvijay Singh of JD (U) in the NDA. During this time, Digvijay had invited Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepal for lunch at his place, along with many other Indian leaders as well. Sitaram Yechury of the CPM was also present, and I availed of the opportunity to speak to him. I suggested that, like the US Congress, we should also adopt a 'Sense of the House' resolution, at least in the Rajya Sabha, where we could muster a majority by bringing together all the like-minded parties.

Natwar Singh, who had become a dissenter within the Congress party by then, and was opposing the deal, also joined in. As did Amar Singh of the Samajwadi Party. We got together to draft a 'Sense of the House' resolution. Sitaram promised to get back to us after getting his party's approval for such a resolution. I also showed it to the leaders of my party and they were in favour of it as well.

Somehow, the Congress party got wind of the move. They put pressure on the CPM not to team up with the BJP for any such resolution to be adopted in the Rajya Sabha. With the Left parties backing out, the chances of the resolution being adopted by the House also receded. However, we had a major debate in the Rajya Sabha in August 2006 that went on until late in the evening. This time, the party gave me the opportunity to initiate it. I would personally rate this speech as one of

my best in Parliament.

At the end of the debate and after prime minister Manmohan Singh's reply, Sitaram Yechury rose to say that he felt that Manmohan Singh's speech summed up the 'Sense of the House'. I immediately sprang to my feet to protest the remark and said there were still fundamental differences in our approach, and that the PM's remarks could not be construed as the sense of the House. Since this was a short-duration discussion, there was no voting at the end of it, but a majority of the Rajya Sabha members had clearly spoken against the deal.

Ironically, the entire credit for opposing the deal was cornered by the Left parties. The reason was simple. They supported the government and so their opposition was much more significant than the BJP's, which was in the actual Opposition in any case. As for me, I had to fight a battle against the deal not only outside but also within my own party.

Arun Shourie and I were the main spokespersons of the party on the nuclear deal. However, we only expressed those views that had been finalised after due discussion within the party, one generally attended by Vajpayee. Therefore, I was shocked when a story appeared prominently in the *Economic Times* newspaper one day, accusing me of pushing my own line in the matter, and against the consensus within the party. Apparently, 'unnamed party sources' had told the newspaper that many within the BJP felt extremely uncomfortable at the way the party was forced to oppose the deal by people like me.

Parliament was in session at the time. It was a Tuesday, the day that the BJP parliamentary party used to meet in the morning. I raised the issue in the meeting and told Advani, who was presiding, that neither Arun Shourie nor I had ever deviated from the party line. Even the written statements we had issued had been seen and approved by the party leadership. 'So where is the question of us pushing our own line or imposing our own views?' Since I was quite agitated about it, I also added, 'Who is the American agent in our party who is spreading this canard?'

Venkaiah Naidu intervened to say that I should not suspect my own party colleagues and the matter was left at that. However, I later learnt that someone had reported the matter to Arun Jaitley, who was not present at the meeting, telling him that I had accused him of being an American agent!

Naturally, Jaitley was quite upset and probably threatened to resign from all party posts if I was not suitably punished. Party president Rajnath Singh rang me up and suggested I talk to Arun Jaitley and apologise. I told Singh that the question of an apology did not arise as I had not named Jaitley. When Jaitley and I finally ran into each other in the Rajya Sabha, where we both sat in the same row, I told him not to feel upset.

I further told him that I had not referred to him, but to the unnamed source in

the party who had levelled such serious – and baseless – allegations against me. If he was not the unnamed source, he had no reason to feel upset, I added. Jaitley told me he had not been following the developments on the nuclear deal and, therefore, the question of his expressing an opinion on it did not arise. This short and frank conversation settled the matter between us, or so I hoped.

One day, to our great surprise, Advani gave a statement supporting the nuclear deal in general. We decided to confront him, and he agreed to meet some of us to discuss the matter. A Hindi daily had carried a news item that same morning, saying that Advani was concerned at the strident opposition to the deal by some of us in the BJP. It further said that a '*prakhar rananitikar*' (astute strategist), within the party had convinced him that this kind of opposition was likely to damage the party's prospects in the elections.

Arun Shourie had not seen the news item. When I pointed it out to him he was furious and shouted, 'Who is this bloody *prakhar rananitikar*?' Advani was not present when the remark was made. When he joined us later, we were able to convince him about the weakness of his argument and it was decided that the party would continue to oppose the deal.

The bilateral 123 Agreement was eventually signed between India and the US by the then Indian EAM Pranab Mukherjee and his counterpart, the then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, on 10 October 2008. Soon thereafter, Manmohan Singh invited a few BJP leaders to discuss the agreement, including Vajpayee, Advani, Jaswant Singh, Rajnath Singh, Arun Shourie, Brajesh Mishra and me.

The text of the agreement had not yet been released into the public domain but the then foreign secretary Shivshankar Menon had perhaps shown it privately to Brajesh Mishra. At a meeting with Vajpayee at his house during the day, Brajesh Mishra deviated for the first time from the party line and said that he had seen the 123 Agreement and had found nothing objectionable in it. We were all surprised at this change in stance. My plea was that since we had not seen the actual text of the agreement, we should not express a view on it just yet.

That same evening, Brajesh Mishra, Arun Shourie, Ranjan Bhattacharya and I were having dinner together at a restaurant when I suddenly got a call from Vajpayee on my mobile phone. His message was straight and simple. He said he hoped that I was fully prepared for the meeting with the PM and that we should not deviate from our line. I assured him that I was. This was also typical of Vajpayee. He found a way to achieve the objective without much fanfare. The BJP leaders invited for the meeting met the prime minister, as scheduled, the following day. Nothing came out of this meeting though, and we reiterated our continued opposition to the deal.

The BJP had even brought out a document in August 2008 that contained the

views of its party leaders on the nuclear deal, including those of Vajpayee and Advani. It can be accessed online[23] and includes some of the Rajya Sabha speeches I have mentioned earlier as well. I separately wrote a tract for the party called the 'ABC of the 123 Agreement'. This was printed in large numbers by the party and widely circulated.

I mention these events in detail to make a larger point—how the entire machinery of the Government of India and of the US government worked to drum up support for the deal, and to discredit any opposition to it. In an article that I had written for *The Asian Age*, I had pointed out that it was not easy to fight the combined might of both the Government of India and the US Administration. Their resources and their reach did carry the day for them eventually and, ignoring the shameless bribing of Lok Sabha MPs in the confidence vote of 2008, the UPA was voted back to power in 2009. But should a vote always determine the right or wrong of an issue?

I had met APJ Abdul Kalam for the first time when I became finance minister in the Chandra Shekhar government. At the time he was serving as the chief executive of India's Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme, before becoming scientific adviser to the defence minister and secretary, Department of Defence Research and Development in July 1992. He came to my office to get my approval on a top-secret file that could not be sent through the normal channels, and I was happy to make his acquaintance.

In the Vajpayee government, our meetings became more frequent. When he became the President of India, I did not have the opportunity of meeting him one-on-one and our interactions were confined to formal occasions. But when the nuclear deal debate was at its peak, I sought a personal meeting with him to which he readily agreed. He was extremely courteous and nice. I spoke to him about the weaknesses of the deal and our objections to it. I had also taken some documents to show him.

As I started to do so, he stopped me. Instead, he picked up some documents of his own that were lying on the table and showed me the carefully-highlighted portions. They referred to the same objections I was raising. With a smile, he told me that he had studied the entire issue in detail and was aware of its weaknesses. I appealed to him to do whatever he could to stop this unequal deal from going through.

Therefore, I was surprised when the Samajwadi Party made a statement later that they had gone to Kalam to be 'educated' on the nuclear deal, and he had told them it was a good deal that they should support. The statement was never challenged by Kalam either. The volte face by the Samajwadi Party on the deal is also one of the many mysteries of our times.

After the 2009 elections, the UPA came back to power with a renewed mandate and went ahead with the deal. Bowing under the pressure of the American suppliers of nuclear reactors, the Government of India prepared a bill to define the civil liability of these n-reactor suppliers. The provisions of The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Bill, 2010 were discussed and debated in detail within the party, and we insisted on certain safeguards that the government needed to incorporate in it.

One of them was that the supplier would be liable for full compensation, even more than the ₹1,500 crore limit that had been fixed by the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage (CSC), 1997, which fixed the civil liability of these suppliers. This was based on the sorry experience the country had had in the Bhopal gas tragedy of December 1984. We were keen to prevent the burden from falling on our people.

Sadly, after our grand victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, our new government has completely forgotten the war we had waged and the battles we had fought between 2005 and 2014 on the issue of the nuclear deal. It has not only gone ahead with the implementation of the deal but has also twisted the provisions of the civil liability law. It has capped the burden of the supplier to the original ₹1,500 crore and, through financial engineering, put the burden beyond that amount on the people of India who will pay for it through increased electricity tariffs.

The supplier may not even be called a 'supplier' in the contract document; but may be referred to as a 'vendor', enabling it to escape the rigours of the law. The warriors of the earlier battles that we had fought with the UPA, who are now part of the government, seem to find nothing unusual in this complete U-turn.

Sadly, the Vajpayee line has been abandoned by the same government that gave him a Bharat Ratna.

CHAPTER 34

STATE ELECTIONS: KARNATAKA AND JHARKHAND

When Advani took over as the party president after the resignation of Venkaiah Naidu in 2004, there was a rumour doing the rounds that I was going to be appointed as a vice president of the party. It was a largely non-functional and decorative post, yet I was disappointed when I was passed over. Later, when Rajnath Singh took over from Advani in January 2006, he did appoint me to the post. He also made me in charge of party affairs in Karnataka where we were sharing power with the JD(S) headed by HD Deve Gowda. His son HD Kumaraswamy was the serving chief minister at the time. In terms of the power-sharing agreement, the JD(S) was supposed to hand over the post of chief minister to the BJP after twenty months of government formation, in October 2007.

Since the time for this handover was approaching fast, the matter required some deft handling. Indications were that Deve Gowda would be reluctant to allow this. My personal relationship with Deve Gowda had been excellent in the past. We had been in the same party, he had joined Chandra Shekhar to form the Samajwadi Janata Party and was one of the five MPs—and the only one outside UP—to have won the Lok Sabha election in 1991. He often used to visit me in my Delhi home and, thus, I was confident of reaching an understanding with him.

Unfortunately, I was mistaken, and he proved to be a tough nut to crack.

The BJP itself was a sharply-divided house in Karnataka. It still is. While BS Yeddyurappa was the most important and powerful leader of the state, HN Ananth Kumar, who was an important general secretary of the party at the central level, did not have the best relationship with him. In turn, he had some other powerful state-level leaders supporting him, who were opposed to Yeddyurappa.

Balancing the two factions was always going to be a tricky exercise. Yeddyurappa had a mercurial temper and was difficult to work with. Ananth Kumar and his supporters could not be ignored either. I knew I would need all my

diplomatic skills to maintain peace between the two factions and negotiate a settlement with the JD(S).

My first challenge came when the JD(S) took umbrage at some remarks made by B. Sriramulu, who was a minister in the government, against the chief minister, and they made his resignation from the government a pre-condition for the transfer of power. Since the remarks could not be justified, we decided that the minister must resign. High drama followed, as Sriramulu was backed by the Reddy brothers of the so-called 'mining lobby' of Bellary.

A secret meeting was arranged between us in an unmarked house in Bangalore (now Bengaluru). There was no guarantee that the minister would come to the meeting and accept our request to tender his resignation. As it turned out, I was lucky as Sriramulu did not only turn up, he also immediately agreed to hand in his resignation. Thus, a great hurdle to the transfer of power was successfully removed.

However, I had underestimated Deve Gowda, who refused to be mollified with this sacrifice alone. The cloak-and-dagger diplomacy continued with negligible results. I had secret meetings with Deve Gowda but, my personal equation with him notwithstanding, I was unable to make any headway. In the meantime, the deadline for the changeover was drawing nearer and the media was abuzz with all kinds of speculation.

I was clear in my mind that the JD(S) had to either hand over the chief minister's post to us or we would have to bring the government down by withdrawing our support. The legislature party in Karnataka and the central leadership of the party accepted this line. The threat worked and JD(S) agreed to the transfer of power. Yeddyurappa was sworn in with much fanfare in the presence of the entire central leadership of the party. The swearing-in took place in the open, in front of the majestic Vidhan Soudha building where a large crowd had assembled to witness this historic moment of the installation of the first BJP-led government in the south of India. Unfortunately, the tenure of the government proved to be much shorter than expected.

In the assembly session that followed, after a week, the JD(S) went back on its promise and decided not to support the government or vote in its favour. I was in Bengaluru and monitoring the situation from a hotel room close to the Vidhan Soudha so that we could meet with Yeddyurappa and the other leaders quickly, and work out our strategy as the situation developed inside the assembly. We also remained in close touch with the central leadership of the party. When it became quite clear that the JD(S) would not vote with us, I advised Yeddyurappa to announce his resignation on the floor of the House instead of being voted out. He did so and that is how our first short-lived government south of the Vindhyas met

its end.

When assembly elections were announced, we started our preparations in right earnest. We were in the thick of it when, to my dismay, I learnt that Rajnath Singh had appointed Arun Jaitley in charge of elections in Karnataka. Earlier, I had told Singh about hearing rumours to this effect and had requested him to consult with me before making any such announcement. That understanding was not honoured, and I learnt about Jaitley's appointment only through the media. When I confronted Singh, he told me that he had been compelled to do so by Yeddyurappa.

I immediately rang up Yeddyurappa who sheepishly confessed to me that since Arun Jaitley had proved to be a lucky mascot for the party in other state elections, he had indeed told Rajnath Singh to give him the charge of Karnataka as well. Jaitley, on his part, made no attempt to consult me on party affairs in Karnataka. Therefore, I decided to withdraw myself completely from the scene. I never visited Karnataka again though, technically, I remained in charge of it until after the elections.

Predictably, the results of the assembly elections went in favour of the party, and we emerged as the single largest party with 110 seats in a 222 strong House, but just short of a majority. This did not stand in the way of our forming the government and Yeddyurappa became the chief minister of Karnataka once again. For the first time ever, the BJP had broken an invisible barrier and become the ruling party in a state south of the Vindhyas on the strength of a popular mandate.

Rolling the Dice: Jharkhand

Back home in my own state of Jharkhand, things had not been going very well for the party. Arjun Munda had succeeded Babulal Marandi, the first chief minister of the newly-carved state in March 2003. I had backed the change because I wanted the BJP-led state government to continue in power, which was not possible any more under Marandi because he had lost the confidence of some of our allies. In the assembly elections of 2005, the BJP tally came down to 35 seats in the 81-member assembly, six short of the magic 41. Once again, we were compelled to form a government with the help of independent MLAs.

According to my information, Babulal Marandi commanded the loyalty of a

majority of the BJP MLAs. I mentioned this to Advani who was the party president and suggested that we go by the majority view. For some reason, and perhaps for the first time, Advani was rather dismissive of my suggestion. He told me that Venkaiah Naidu had gone there as an observer and that he was sure to do the right thing. While I was not personally present in Ranchi, I was later told that the views of all the MLAs had not been obtained. Yet Arjun Munda was declared elected as the leader of the legislature party and was subsequently sworn in as the chief minister.

Babulal Marandi, in turn, continued to drift away from the party. I tried my best to prevent this and used whatever clout I had left in the BJP to ensure that he stayed on. On at least two occasions, I arranged meetings between Munda and him at my home in Demotand, Hazaribagh, so that there could be peace between the two. All the contentious issues were discussed, and an agreement reached to the effect that Marandi's concerns would be expeditiously attended to.

Unfortunately, Munda did not keep his word on both occasions and Marandi finally decided to leave the party. I had warned Rajnath Singh that this was likely to happen, and he had assigned the task of bringing the two together to other functionaries of the party instead. They failed miserably in their mission to broker peace between Munda and Marandi.

On 18 May 2006, I was informed by Ajay Maru that Babulal Marandi was likely to resign from the party within a day or so. I immediately informed Rajnath Singh, who requested me to proceed to Ranchi at once and persuade Marandi not to do so. I went to Ranchi, accompanied by Ajay Maru and Devdas Apte who had been asked to accompany me to Ranchi. On reaching there, we were informed that Marandi had already announced his resignation from the BJP at his village home in Giridih district.

I got in touch with some of his close lieutenants and managed to speak to him through them. Marandi told me that he was leaving for Ranchi and would have no objection to meeting me but only at my place in Demotand, and certainly not anywhere in Ranchi. I proceeded to Hazaribagh, where Marandi joined me for lunch at my place. Since the deed was already done, there was nothing that could be done to immediately undo it. We parted in the best of spirits, but the unity of the BJP in Jharkhand suffered a severe blow that day.

Though I had also been in favour of Arjun Munda taking over as CM in place of Babulal Marandi in 2002, and had nothing against him, I soon noticed that Munda began seeing me as a threat. I was never a candidate for the chief ministership of Jharkhand and had often reiterated my stand on the issue whenever questioned by the media. However, Munda was not entirely assured and considered both Marandi and me as his rivals.

After Marandi left the party, I was the only other threat left. I was quite concerned about my troubled relationship with Munda because it often hampered development work in my constituency. I was not at all comfortable with this situation.

Once, during a trip to Hazaribagh, I was very upset when I received more complaints than usual from people in my constituency. They complained bitterly about the prevailing corruption in the administration, about being forced to pay bribes even for the execution of schemes financed by the MPLAD fund. A senior journalist of the district met with me during the trip, and I mentioned the problem to him in a casual conversation. He published this as a front-page story in his newspaper the following day.

Arjun Munda must have been upset at seeing it and complained to the central leadership. I was visiting my son Sumant in Mumbai when I got a call from Sanjay Joshi, the general secretary (organisation) of the BJP. He told me that it had been decided that I would no longer be the spokesperson of the party.

Being a spokesperson of the party was no big deal, but dismissal from the responsibility certainly was. I had taken a train from Mumbai to Delhi for my return journey and was surprised when media persons invaded the train compartment at the very first stop, to get my reaction to the development. I avoided giving them a response and instructed the attendant of the coach not to encourage their entry into the coach at later stations.

However, the media was present in full strength when I arrived at the New Delhi railway station and I was compelled to respond. In a measured tone, I told them that the party had been right in removing me from the responsibility. The spokesperson of the party was not expected to speak against the party or its state governments. I also made it clear that I was not complaining and that I welcomed my new-found freedom. Unfortunately, matters did not end there.

In public life, people often approach MPs or MLAs for assistance to get their work done and I was no exception. Karpoori Thakur's son had requested me to get his child admitted to a medical college in Jharkhand under the chief minister's quota. I had written to Arjun Munda to help in the matter. Similarly, the owner of the garage where I used to get my cars repaired, who was dying of cancer, had approached me to get his brother-in-law posted as a deputy superintendent of jail in Dhanbad. I had written a letter to the CM in this matter. There were a couple of other letters that I had written to him as well, with similar small requests. So, I was shocked when a Hindi weekly magazine carried this story prominently, with copies of my letters, insinuating that I was doing this to make money.

How did letters written by me to the CM find their way into the media? It remains a mystery to this day. Or is it? Public life can be full of such hazards.

After the 2010 assembly elections, a coalition government was formed in Jharkhand with Shibu Soren of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) as the chief minister and Raghubar Das of the BJP as the deputy CM. The government's majority was based on the coming together of four political parties—BJP, JMM, All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) and JD(U). I told the media that since the majority was based on the coming together of political parties, as opposed to support extended by independent MLAs earlier, the government would endure. How wrong I was.

Soren and his party did not dissociate themselves from the UPA at the Centre, despite joining up with the BJP in the state, and even voted with the former in Parliament. Thus, the BJP was compelled to withdraw support from his government and it fell in May 2010 after only five months in power. President's rule was imposed in Jharkhand and the assembly was kept in suspended animation. For some strange reason, which only became obvious to me later, Shibu Soren offered to form a government again under the leadership of the BJP.

Since we had burnt our fingers earlier, the BJP leadership, especially Advani, was very reluctant to team up with the JMM again, and there seemed to be no alternative to fresh elections. It was at this stage that some BJP and JMM MLAs approached me, suggesting I should intervene to explore the formation of an alternate government in Jharkhand to save the assembly from certain dissolution.

Taking the request seriously, I met BJP president Nitin Gadkari and suggested that we form a government headed by a BJP CM in Jharkhand, taking advantage of the JMM's offer. Gadkari told me that he was personally in favour of the proposal but was helpless in the face of Advani's opposition to it. He asked me to persuade Advani, so I met Advani and made the same suggestion. He told me that he might change his mind only on one condition: that I agree to go as the chief minister of Jharkhand. I told him that this matter could be decided later but, in the meantime, we should accept the JMM's offer. I informed Gadkari that Advani was not averse to the proposal but did not tell him about the condition he had attached.

I was keen that the coalition be based on firmer foundations than before, and requested my friend Ajay Maru to arrange a confidential meeting for me with JMM and AJSU leaders, in Delhi. I suggested inviting Arjun Munda to the meeting as well. Maru arranged the Delhi meeting, in which Hemant Soren of the JMM, Sudesh Mahto of AJSU, Arjun Munda and I took part. I told the leaders clearly that if they wanted the government to last, we should have a written and signed – but confidential – agreement on key issues.

The first issue was that of the chief ministership itself. We were all in agreement that the CM would be from the BJP. I specifically asked them whether they would leave the choice of the CM entirely to the BJP or if they had any other

view in the matter. Mahto had no problem in leaving the matter to the BJP.

Soren first agreed with this formulation but later, after some hesitation, said that JMM would prefer the chief minister to be from a scheduled tribe. I asked him to clarify whether this was a preference or a condition. After some hesitation again, he told me that it was a condition. Interestingly, Arjun Munda maintained a stoic silence throughout the discussion. We also discussed a few other issues like each party's representation in the Cabinet and the allocation of portfolios, among other things. It didn't prove difficult to build a consensus on these.

Once it became known that the party had decided to form the government in Jharkhand, vested interests who expected to benefit from the government suddenly became active. Arjun Munda mobilised some BJP MLAs who were brought to Delhi to persuade the central leadership to accept him as the next chief minister. Politics is a strange game. While I was initially amused at the development, I was later shocked to find that two MLAs from Hazaribagh district, who had been elected because I had worked hard for them, had also joined hands with Munda.

Advani's views were completely ignored and the party decided to make Arjun Munda the chief minister of Jharkhand in September 2010, once again. I was never interested in the chief ministership of the small state, as I have already said, but the way Munda behaved during this time did leave me bewildered, despite my many years in politics.

The reason why Shibu Soren had agreed to form a government under the leadership of the BJP, in the first place, had been simple. He wanted his son Hemant Soren to become the deputy chief minister and, in course of time, the CM. Thus, Hemant Soren was appointed as deputy chief minister in the Arjun Munda dispensation, along with Sudesh Mahto of the AJSU. Biding its time, the JMM finally brought down the Munda government in January 2013.

Later, in July of the same year, with the help of the Congress party and some independent MLAs, it formed another government in Jharkhand under the chief ministership of Hemant Soren, after another period of President's rule in the state. The BJP was left twiddling its thumbs once again as Shibu Soren, the master strategist, finally achieved what he had initially set out to do.

As I have said earlier, politics is a strange game, indeed, and the BJP finally got its sweet revenge in the assembly elections of November-December 2014.

The BJP won thirty-five seats in Jharkhand and, though still short of a majority, it formed a government headed by Raghubar Das with the support of AJSU, which had won five seats in alliance with the BJP. It now has a majority of its own because of a split in the Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (JVM) led by Babulal Marandi. I still believe the BJP could have achieved a majority on its own in the elections, had we not made the mistake of aligning with the AJSU. I had told both party president

Amit Shah and prime minister Narendra Modi that we would be better off on our own, without an alliance in Jharkhand. Had we contested alone, the BJP would have won at least seven to ten additional seats. However, my advice was ignored yet again.

Hazaribagh Lok Sabha constituency became the worst casualty under this arrangement, as two of the five assembly seats in the constituency were given to AJSU, out of a total of eight that had been allotted to them in the entire state. I could understand the Ramgarh assembly constituency going to the AJSU because the party had a sitting MLA, but there was no reason to give it the Barkagaon assembly seat. I have no doubt in my mind that this was done as another slight to me and to weaken the party in that constituency.

Both Arjun Munda and Sudesh Mahto lost their assembly seats in the 2014 state elections. Mahto lost to a candidate who had been forced to quit the BJP because of the alliance and had joined the JMM. Munda lost to a JMM candidate as well.

Poetic justice, perhaps?

2009 Elections

I was keen to avenge my 2004 defeat from Hazaribagh and had spent my years in Rajya Sabha cultivating the constituency, keeping in very close touch with my voters. But as the Lok Sabha elections approached, party president Rajnath Singh told me, one day, that Hazaribagh was not a suitable constituency for me – based on its caste composition – and I should consider moving to Dhanbad.

Dhanbad, with Bokaro and Sindri thrown in, could boast of a cosmopolitan population. Rita Verma of the BJP was already the likely candidate from there. She had won the seat for the BJP for the first time in 1991, soon after her husband Randhir Verma (IPS), who had been the SP in Dhanbad, had lost his life in an encounter with terrorists.

Randhir Verma was a celebrated and courageous police officer and his martyrdom had generated a wave of sympathy for his wife. Also, she had endeared herself to the people of the constituency through her sheer hard work and went on to win three more consecutive elections in 1996, 1998 and 1999. She had also been appointed a minister of state in the Vajpayee government. However, she had lost

the election in 2004, like most of us in Jharkhand and elsewhere, and was the natural candidate from Dhanbad once again.

For my part, I had no wish to queer the pitch for her. I also did not want to run away from Hazaribagh. Honour demanded that if I had lost from Hazaribagh, I should also win from there. Thus, I told Rajnath Singh that I had no desire to leave Hazaribagh and contest from another constituency.

But the path I chose was not an easy one.

Yadunath Pandey, an activist of the Bajrang Dal who had won the Lok Sabha election from Hazaribagh in 1989 on the back of a communal riot, continued to take interest in its politics and would become hyper active whenever elections approached. In 2009, both he and I were members of the state election committee of Jharkhand, which met to consider names for the fourteen Lok Sabha constituencies of the state. The unwritten rule was that if a member of the committee had a personal interest in a constituency, s/he would leave the meeting when that constituency came up for consideration. So, when Hazaribagh came up I got up and left. However, Pandey chose to stay back for a while instead.

I later learnt that he had stayed back to tell the committee that since I had also lost the 2004 election, he and I should be considered at par, arguing that he had a better chance of winning from the constituency than I did. Fortunately for me, the committee was overwhelmingly in my favour and decided to send only one name for Hazaribagh to the central election committee, which gave me the nomination. I became the BJP candidate from Hazaribagh once again.

Apart from keeping in touch with the constituency, I had also started my preparations for the 2009 Lok Sabha election at least two years in advance. The first task at hand was the setting up of genuine booth committees in as many booths as possible, as this had been a major weakness in the earlier elections. So, I took up the task of identifying the people to man these committees through a series of meetings with party workers across the constituency. The committees were supposed to have at least ten members, with a convener and co-convener each.

I did not want to blindly accept the recommendations of the block-level organisations, as my earlier experience had shown that the committees formed by block presidents were often fake and undependable. So, I decided to set up independent teams to verify lists prepared by the block presidents. Each team comprised three members: one from the block itself; another from outside it, preferably even from outside the district; and, lastly, one of my trusted workers. They were given the mandate to go to the spot, call a meeting of the party workers and verify the list.

They were also given the authority to make on-the-spot changes based on their judgement. If it was not possible to form a committee for whatever reason, they

were to come back without setting one up. This arrangement needed a lot of personal attention from me but, at the end of the day, it worked very well, and we ended up with genuine booth committees in at least 80 per cent of the booths in the constituency. This task had been assigned by me to Prof. Surendra Sinha, an extremely efficient, effective and committed worker of the party. He did it full justice. The efficacy of these booth committees not only proved itself in the 2009 elections but also in subsequent assembly and Lok Sabha elections.

I kicked off my actual election campaign from 1 January 2009, long before my candidature was officially announced. On that day, we organised a big picnic lunch in my mango orchard in Demotand at which many of our workers were present. From 2 January onwards, I started visiting the various villages in my constituency, according to a plan prepared meticulously by Surendra Sinha, which would enable me to cover the entire constituency within a fixed time limit.

This continued, uninterrupted, until we were a fortnight away from polling day. This way I was able to visit most of the important villages in my constituency. The last fortnight before the election was spent in addressing public meetings and rallies all over Hazaribagh, again organised by Surendra Sinha. The other tasks related to the election campaign were managed by me through the two district party presidents—Shiv Shanker Gupta of Hazaribagh and Prakash Mishra of Ramgarh.

Another feature of my 2009 campaign was that I did not invite any national leader to campaign for me and discouraged any such overture instead. Rajnath Singh was party president and expressed his desire to visit my constituency, and I could not say no to him. So, I arranged two programmes for him, one in Maharajganj in Chauparan block and another in Ramgarh town.

I had planned a road show in Ramgarh on the same day, so there was already a crowd ready for him to address. The problem with getting big leaders for an election campaign is that if the crowd at the meeting is not large enough, it can send a wrong signal. Crowds do not come easily. They must be brought, which is both expensive and time consuming.

The other person who came to campaign for me was my friend and actor-turned-politician Shatrughan Sinha. He came largely because we regard him as part of our family. Besides, it is also not necessary to bring in the crowds in his case. They come on their own. Shatrughan addressed a few massive rallies for me.

My theory behind not inviting other big party leaders to campaign for me was that the people of my constituency were mostly interested in seeing and interacting with me. Most people get to see these leaders almost daily on TV screens, in any case. In the 2004 election, I had made the mistake of getting many leaders and film personalities to campaign for me, with little or no impact on the election outcome.

My children also came out to help me with the election. Both Jayant and Sumant spent a few weeks organising the campaign. My daughter, Sharmila, had travelled to Hazaribagh all the way from Malaysia as well, where her husband was posted as the high commissioner of India. The three of them travelled around the constituency and even addressed some public meetings.

Nilima had started several women's self-help groups earlier and had been organising free training to village women in durrie-making, tailoring and other skills, besides running free computer courses, in collaboration with Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan. My elder brother, Samar, who had retired, stayed with us in the mango orchard. His son Sharat and wife Sangeeta had been looking after all these social welfare activities at Hazaribagh in our absence. Thus, my entire family contributed and helped my campaign in several ways.

I did win the election but was not happy at the margin of victory. Saurabh Narayan Singh of the Congress party put up a spirited fight, and the number of votes he got was the largest for his party across many Lok Sabha elections. I won by around 40,000 votes, a much lower margin than my last victory from the constituency. Still, my Lok Sabha win in 2009 was a vindication of sorts. I had not only avenged my 2004 defeat, but I had done it in circumstances that were largely favourable to the UPA.

I would not have been able to do so if God had not kept me alive because, in the meantime, I had also gone through a harrowing experience on the health front.

CHAPTER 35

BATTLES LOST AND WON

I was diagnosed with cancer of the lymph in September 2006 and had to be largely out of commission for at least two years during the treatment and recovery phase. It all began when I was in London in June/July 2006. The President of the All India Tennis Association. Anil Khanna, the secretary general of the association, had persuaded me to undertake the trip so that, apart from watching the world-famous tournament at Wimbledon, I could also meet with friends from the world of tennis at the Mecca of the sport. During the trip, I noticed a little lump on the right side of my neck for the first time while shaving. It was not painful and I forgot all about it on my return to India.

A couple of months later, in late August 2006, I went to the Parliament House Annexe dispensary for treatment of a stomach upset. After the doctor-in-charge, Dr. Bhatnagar, had finished examining me, I casually told him about the lump on my neck. I was surprised when he took it more seriously than I had expected him to, and personally took me to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist. After further examination, both the doctors recommended an urgent biopsy.

The following day, I went to the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital where a doctor carried out a needle biopsy of the lump. I was told that the result would become available in the afternoon. As chance would have it, I was leaving for Dehradun in the afternoon to attend a meeting of the BJP's national executive. On reaching Dehradun, I called the doctor who told me that though my biopsy report had been received, it was not very definitive and had been sent to another pathologist for an opinion. That opinion was likely to become available only the next day.

All my enthusiasm to participate in the meeting at Dehradun vanished with that worrisome news. I immediately realised that something was seriously amiss, and I spent the night worrying about it. The following day, I called the doctor at the appointed time, only to be given the bad news that the lump was indeed malignant, as they had suspected. He added that he would like to carry out a more detailed examination on my return.

Naturally, the news was extremely upsetting, and I decided to return to Delhi after attending the inaugural session of the meeting. I told my friend Shatrughan Sinha about the change in my plan without telling him the reason for it, and we both returned to Delhi together. I had already told my PS, Gajender Sharma, to fix an appointment for me for further examination at Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital.

I kept this plan to myself and did not even share it with two of my closest friends in Parliament, Shatrughan Sinha and Digvijay Singh. I had planned to quietly visit Mumbai, get myself examined and then talk to my friends, if needed. But fate, once again, had other plans for me.

As chance would have it, when Nilima and I came out of the airport at Mumbai, we ran into Shatrughan's wife, Poonam, and his daughter Sonakshi, who was not yet the famous actor she is today. They had come to receive him, as he was arriving by a later flight. I told Poonam to tell Shatrughan that I would call him after I reached home. I rang him later and told him about my plan to visit the Tata Hospital the following day. However, I noticed that he appeared more worried than I was and suggested that I see Dr. Sanjay Sharma, a famous oncologist and close friend of his, that evening itself.

At the appointed time, I went to Dr. Sharma's clinic, which had been specially opened for me on a Sunday. Shatrughan was already there. Dr. Sharma examined me but suggested that instead of going to the Tata Hospital the next day, I should come to the Raheja Hospital where I could be examined by Dr. SH Advani, a well-known expert in the field.

I accepted his advice, cancelled my appointment at the Tata Hospital and went to Raheja instead, where Dr. Advani examined me. It was decided that I should be taken to the operation theatre immediately for a full biopsy. The report was quickly prepared by the pathologist and the doctors concluded that the growth was indeed malignant, and I had cancer of the lymph. All this happened while I was still in the operation theatre. The doctors decided that a bone marrow examination should also be carried out, which was done immediately. I was told to come after two days, by when the bone marrow report would also be ready.

On the way back from the hospital, I remember speaking on the phone to both Shatrughan and Digvijay and telling them, almost cheerfully, that I had been diagnosed with cancer. None of them shared my cheer but felt deeply concerned and offered to help in whichever way they could. I told Shatrughan to also inform the party leadership of my Illness. However, I informed Vajpayee separately via Ranjan Bhattacharya.

When I returned to the hospital after a couple of days, I was informed that the bone marrow report was normal, that my cancer was in its early stages and that

there were bright chances of it being completely cured after treatment. Dr. Advani prescribed six rounds of chemotherapy, with a gap of three weeks between each. I told the doctors I was ready to begin immediately, that very day, and was transported to a room on another floor for my first round of chemotherapy.

I took it as sportingly as I could but, after about half an hour or so, experienced a sudden reaction. I felt very uneasy and cold. The doctor gave me an anti-allergy medicine and slowed down the speed of the drip, which gave me some relief. My mood improved further when my friend Pahlaj Nihalani, the famous Bollywood film producer, visited me in the hospital. The chemotherapy process lasted for about ten hours. It was late evening by the time we finished, after which I returned to Sumant's home where my wife and I were staying.

I was advised to take the remaining five doses at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi. The doctors in Mumbai knew Dr. Lalit Kumar of AIIMS and recommended him highly. After staying in Mumbai for a few days, we returned to Delhi, got in touch with Dr. Kumar and decided that the next dose would be administered under his supervision at AIIMS. In the meantime, I was told to ease up on my public engagements by keeping them to the barest minimum, avoid further travel and take things easy at home as well.

I weathered the first two rounds of chemotherapy without any major complications. It was only after the third round that things started becoming difficult for me. I felt very weak and started vomiting uncontrollably one night. Earlier that evening, since my wife had some writing work to do, I had suggested that she go to another room so that I was not disturbed. After finishing her work, she fell asleep there itself. I felt too weak to even go to the other room and wake her up.

So, it was only in the morning, when she came to our room that she realised the condition I was in. She immediately contacted AIIMS and was advised to rush me there at once. The doctors decided to admit me to urgently administer some antibiotics and other medicines. I had to stay in the hospital for three days. Since I was not comfortable there, I requested the doctors to allow me to go home. They agreed only after I promised to create a hospital-like atmosphere at home, to avoid further infection.

The last dose of chemotherapy was administered in the first week of January 2007. Meanwhile, I had made two trips abroad and a special trip to Puttaparthi to meet Sathya Sai Baba whom I had visited many times earlier as well. My first trip was to Germany where I had been invited by the then president, Horst Köhler, an old friend from his days at the IMF, to participate in a two-day discussion on global economic issues in Berlin. The doctors told me that I could undertake the trip only if I felt up to it and I decided to go. My wife Nilima accompanied me.

The conclave in Berlin was interesting, and I met some old friends from the world of global finance. But my health continued to cause problems. Fortunately for me, the daughter and son-in-law of my very good friend and colleague from the Bihar cadre of the IAS, BP Verma (who is no more, sadly) were posted at our embassy in Berlin. Neeta and her husband Anurag Bhushan both belonged to the IFS. Since they are like family, they looked after us very well and even brought me home-cooked food for practically every meal. They also got the embassy doctor to examine me when I felt sick.

The other trip I made was to London at the invitation of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The secretary general had assembled some experts from the member countries of the Commonwealth to discuss issues relating to its future. The London outing was not as difficult as the Berlin one, from the point of view of my health. It was only after my return from London that I took the last dose of chemotherapy.

However, it was the trip to Puttaparthi that was truly special. I had visited Sai Baba of Puttaparthi on various earlier occasions. Since I was not a prostrating type of follower, Baba would always offer me a chair to sit whenever I met him. Two of my IAS batchmates, Chakravarthi and Giri, were working with Baba. Chakravarthi had been with Baba for many years, and Giri had joined him later. Thus, access to Baba was not a problem for me. When I fell ill with cancer, my wife insisted that we go to Baba to take his blessings. We travelled to Puttaparthi, accompanied by my nephew Devesh—my wife's sister Arati's son. She had been a devotee of Baba for many years and was also a teacher in the school at Puttaparthi.

When I was ushered into Baba's presence, I did not immediately talk about my illness. He discussed the political situation and other matters of national importance with me instead. When Nilima was invited into the room and joined us with Devesh, she lost no time in telling Baba about my illness and pleaded with him to bless me so that I would be rid of the dreaded disease. Baba asked me where the cancer was and when I pointed to my neck, he stroked it and said, twice, 'cancer cancelled'. I was later told that he had given me a very special blessing and that the cancer would indeed be cancelled. His words greatly restored my confidence and gave me much peace of mind.

Another unforgettable experience from the days and months I spent suffering from cancer was that of Chandra Shekhar's visit to my place. He was seriously ill himself, having first undergone bypass surgery and then fallen victim to cancer as well. He had gone to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre in New York for treatment, but even that had not helped. He had become weak, could barely walk, and his speech had also become quite slurred.

But when someone told him about my illness, he lost no time in calling me on the phone. I could barely follow what he was saying but this I understood – that he

would drop by the following morning to see me. I received him as he alighted from the car, held his hand and walked him to my living room. He told me not to worry, advised me to go to the US for further treatment and promised to help me in whichever way he could.

I was deeply moved. His visit and concern for my health brought tears to my eyes. He was terminally ill himself, yet he felt concerned enough to visit me personally and offer his good wishes, advice and help in my recovery process. I could not help but compare his behaviour with that of my colleagues in the BJP. There was a world of difference. No one in the BJP had even bothered to enquire after my health.

None of them ever dropped in to see me, either in the hospital or at home. Even when I had to remain absent from Parliament for an extended period during the winter session of 2006, my colleagues remained supremely unconcerned. The only exception was Arun Shourie, who not only showed his concern but also gave me some books on cancer to read. Shatrughan Sinha and Digvijay Singh, of course, continued to be pillars of strength.

I told Chandra Shekhar that my treatment was in the hands of competent doctors and perhaps there was no need for me to go to the US. I said that I shared his optimism about my getting well soon and that I was also confident that he would overcome his own ordeal. Unfortunately, Chandra Shekhar succumbed to cancer some time later. It came as a big blow to me and I was completely grief-stricken. I had lost my real leader, the person who had mentored me in politics and the one who had been my true friend, philosopher and guide.

Fortunately, I fully recovered from the cancer after six doses of chemotherapy. A doctor at AIIMS (not Dr. Kumar) recommended radiation as well but the doctors in Mumbai considered it unnecessary. Shri Sathya Sai Baba had also told me, 'no radiation', so I decided to skip it. I used all of 2007 and 2008 to regain my strength, to be completely fit and ready for the gruelling task that awaited me in 2009: the Lok Sabha election I was determined to win.

When it did come around, I did win my own election though the defeat of the party came as a huge shock. The UPA was returned to power with an enhanced majority in 2009, despite its many failures.

We were destined to spend another five years in the Opposition.

CHAPTER 36

BACK TO BUSINESS: MY THIRD LOK SABHA TERM

Many of my party colleagues who were in the Rajya Sabha with me had also won the Lok Sabha election in 2009. Murli Manohar Joshi, Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj, Jaswant Singh and Shatrughan Sinha fell in this category. My relationship with Advani had suffered a setback, following my criticism of him for his 'Jinnah was a secular person' remark in Pakistan.

Advani was elected the leader of the BJP parliamentary party, and Rajnath Singh had even suggested that I propose his name for the post. I performed this duty with pleasure because my admiration and respect for Advani had not gone down one bit, despite our differences. I regarded my criticism of his Jinnah remark as an honest difference of opinion. After his election, the parliamentary party authorised him to choose the other office bearers in both Houses of Parliament.

Advani appointed Sushma Swaraj as the leader of the party in Lok Sabha, thereby anointing her as the Leader of Opposition. Gopinath Munde was made the deputy leader, which entitled him to a seat in the front row. Arun Jaitley became the Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, while I had to be content with being a member of the core group of the parliamentary party and a seat in the second row.

As far as the parliamentary committees were concerned, I was ignored once again. Jaswant Singh became the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), of which I was made a member; MM Joshi was appointed as chairman of the Standing Committee on Finance; and Sushma Swaraj the chairman of the Standing Committee on External Affairs. It was only in January 2010 that I was made chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee of the MEA.

When Jaswant Singh was expelled from the party in August 2009 for his book on Muhammad Ali Jinnah[24] and forced to resign from the PAC, Joshi moved to the PAC. When Sushma Swaraj asked for my preference, I told her clearly that I would like to go to the Standing Committee on Finance as its chairman. She agreed, and I

shifted to the standing committee on finance, which I headed for the remaining term of the 15th Lok Sabha.

Jaswant Singh's expulsion from the party was one of its saddest chapters. The BJP's top leadership had assembled in Shimla for a Chintan Baithak after our defeat in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, where Singh was one of the invitees. It was perhaps the first time that I was not invited to such a meeting—another sign of my receding importance in the party.

I later learnt that Narendra Modi, who was the chief minister of Gujarat at the time, was unhappy at the contents of the book Jaswant Singh had recently published on Jinnah. He had already banned it in Gujarat but, at Shimla, he apparently went step further and insisted on expelling Singh from the party itself for his views on Jinnah.

Nobody, not even Advani, had the courage to take issue with him and Jaswant Singh was unceremoniously expelled from the party. He had been one of the senior-most leaders of the party until then.

Singh became critical of the party after his expulsion and even said some harsh things about it. However, he was no VP Singh, and failed to convert this into an opportunity. He became a sorry figure instead—alone, isolated and left with very few friends. Shatrughan and I maintained our friendship with him, nonetheless, and did not hesitate to talk to him or visit his place.

During one such meeting with me, Singh expressed a desire to return to the party. I immediately went to Advani and pleaded with him, as strongly as I could, that he should start the process of bringing him back into the party. As a first step, I asked Advani to meet with Jaswant Singh, and he immediately agreed to do so. The meeting took place and the ball was set rolling for Singh's return to the party. We were all happy when it finally happened.

My third Lok Sabha tenure was different from the first two. During the first two tenures, I was a minister in the Government of India, and some things automatically came my way. For instance, I was entitled to a staff car both in Delhi and in Jharkhand. I was entitled to be received by senior officials of the district whenever I visited the constituency. Meetings with state chief ministers and governors were routine. In India, there is a presumed air of wisdom and knowledge attached to authority and public figures. People are often keen to get a minister to pontificate, be it a discussion on the philosophy of the Vedas or the necessity of

toilets in a village.

I generally used to avoid such functions. In any case, I had no time for them. Such invitations declined considerably during my third Lok Sabha term as I was not a minister any longer. I noticed, however, that the expectations of the people in my constituency had increased by leaps and bounds. They felt that, as an ordinary MP, I had all the time in the world to spend in the constituency. On the other hand, I discovered that even as an MP without a ministerial portfolio, I had more than a full-time job in Delhi. Establishing a balance between the various demands on my time was difficult, tricky and not always to the satisfaction of the people in my constituency.

As I have already mentioned, most people expect their MP to find the time to attend to their smallest problems. An MP is the chief grievance officer of his or her constituency. MPs must listen to each one of their visitors, whether in the constituency or in Delhi. Any impatience on their part is considered a sin, and they must act on each complaint in a manner that mollifies the complainant. Above all that, they must also find the time to gossip or make small talk with their visitors. Being business-like is strictly forbidden. Visitors do not leave even after their work has been attended to, and often hang around to either meet old friends or just shoot the breeze.

An MP's residence is like a club where people come and leave, as per their convenience. If tea and snacks are served, it becomes an even more attractive proposition. MPs must also be available to their constituents on a 24x7 basis either personally or via other means of communication. In Delhi, they must also provide lodging facilities to their visitors, at the very least. An important part of an MP's responsibility is to secure admission for the children of his or her constituents into schools or colleges, wherever needed, arrange for their medical treatment and even secure reservations in trains.

It is a lot of work, but is there a different way of doing it?

I especially remember a trip I made to my constituency, immediately after the end of the long Budget Session of Parliament around mid-May one year. I had a plan to visit a few remote villages in one of the blocks – in the scorching heat of the Jharkhand summer, no less – and inaugurate some schemes that had been completed, as well as meet the people there.

I reached there around mid-day and noticed some people waiting for me under the shade of a big tree. As I proceeded to join them there, I could not help but wonder how, only the day before, I had been in the majestic Parliament building, with airconditioned halls and luxurious carpets that mute the footfalls of MPs who conduct the affairs of state there with great aplomb. And sometimes, or even most of the time, by disrupting its proceedings or shouting inside the Houses!

However, as MPs, we also touch base with the stark reality of our constituencies, which we must do as often as needed. In the heat and dust of the village in Jharkhand that day, I realised that it is this reality that gives strength to our democracy. MPs must be rooted in reality; they can never stray far from it. If they drift, they run the risk of being defeated. After all, it is the people who elect us, not those plush carpets, varnished tables and chairs or the air conditioners of Parliament.

In one of my interventions in the Lok Sabha during those days, I remember telling the House that when I had appeared for the IAS exam, I had thought it was the toughest examination of my life. Until I contested for the Lok Sabha. I had no doubt in my mind, I said, that contesting a direct election is the toughest test one can face in life. However, merely passing that test is not the end of the matter. After passing it, an MP is under scrutiny by the people of his or her constituency every single day and must pass a test daily. Who can honestly say that the life of an MP is a bed of roses?

As for me, I took my responsibilities as an MP seriously—both in the constituency as well as back in Delhi, where I devoted a considerable amount of time to the parliamentary committees of which I was a member. The Standing Committee on Finance, for example, was serious business. We were always overloaded with work, which consisted of the examination of legislations referred to us; subjects of public importance selected by us for deliberation in the committee; and study tours once or twice a year.

Some of the most important legislations of that period came to us for examination, like the Companies Bill, the Insurance Bill, the Pension Bill, the Direct Taxes Code Bill, the Aadhaar Bill and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Constitutional Amendment Bill – which I will briefly touch upon later – along with many others.

The Committee also had to examine the demands for grants of the ministries under its charge, which included not only the entire Ministry of Finance but also the Planning Commission, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs and the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Thus, the Committee had to meet at least once a week to dispose of the work assigned to it as expeditiously as possible.

As chairman of the committee, I was always the last to ask questions. Whenever witnesses appeared before us, and after the formality of introductions was over, I would say a few words to introduce the subject of the day and then open the floor for questions by the members. This was done in a very orderly fashion. I used to call out the name of each member present, according to a formula I had in mind and one that I used to change after every meeting, to ask questions. After one had finished, I would proceed to the next member. In this way, each member was

assured of a turn and there was no resultant rush to ask questions.

Supplementary questions were allowed only after all the members had had their turn. I noticed that the system worked beautifully, to the satisfaction of the entire committee as well as the witnesses who appeared before it. Even the senior-most members cooperated fully and were never in a hurry to jump the queue. I had no hesitation in giving the first opportunity to a member who had to leave early for some reason.

Some of the most distinguished parliamentarians were members of this committee. They always did their homework thoroughly and would ask serious and searching questions, with the result that most people who appeared before the committee went back deeply impressed. Anyone who walked in with the presumption of being able to take parliamentarians lightly, left with a completely different impression on their way out. Even Rahul Gandhi observed this practice meticulously when he joined the Committee and, if he had to leave early, he would always send me a slip and leave only with my permission.

Almost all the reports produced by the Committee were unanimous. We did not allow it to get divided along party lines. Opinions were expressed freely and accommodated to every extent possible. The members of the ruling coalition did their work honestly and did not feel obliged to toe the government line. The Left party members were also quite reasonable. Perhaps the most glorious day of my Parliamentary career was the day the Standing Committee on Finance had its last meeting. Member after member, cutting across all party lines, showered encomiums on me, which I shall cherish till the end of my life.

Pranab Mukherjee, when he was finance minister, maintained the most cordial of relations with me. He would often invite me for a meal at his place where we would discuss issues of common concern and was generally accommodating at my point of view. He even personally invited me for meetings that he had with the BJP leadership on issues relating to his ministry. The BJP leaders would often be surprised to see me at these meetings, as I had not been invited by them. I cannot say the same thing about Chidambaram who, during his tenure as finance minister, remained as distant and difficult as ever. The BJP leaders in Parliament did not interfere with my work in the finance committee, even though the line taken in its reports would often become the party line.

I can take some credit for the amendment to the Companies' Bill relating to

corporate social responsibility (CSR). I had decided to make CSR compulsory, by law, in consultation with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, and in the teeth of severe opposition to it by the corporates. Even later, when the bill was to be brought back to Parliament after amendments by the government, I had insisted that there be no compromise on this provision. I am happy it has become a part of our law and that thousands of crores of rupees are now available for social work by the corporates.

Regarding the Insurance Bill, the government had proposed raising the proportion of foreign direct investment (FDI) from 26 per cent to 49 per cent, among other things. In the original bill that I had introduced in Parliament in 1999, I had provided for foreign investment of up to 49 per cent. At that point of time, it had not been acceptable to the Congress party whose support we needed to pass the bill in the Rajya Sabha. Murli Deora, the then chairman of the finance committee, had played a very constructive role and commended the bill to Parliament. However, the Congress party was determined to make a point at that time and insisted on foreign equity being brought down to 26 per cent.

Pramod Mahajan, who was the parliamentary affairs minister at that time held a series of meetings between Madhavrao Scindia and Priyaranjan Das Munshi of the Congress party and me, to sort the matter out. But the Congress party would not budge from its rigid position. Ultimately, I had to accept their demand and bring an amendment to cap foreign equity at 26 per cent. I also had to give a solemn guarantee, on the floor of the House in Lok Sabha, that not only would foreign investment be limited to 26 per cent, no financial engineering would be allowed to breach this limit as had happened in some other sectors.

No sooner did the Congress party return to power in 2004 than wisdom dawned on it to raise this limit to 49 per cent. When the matter came up before the finance committee, the US was already facing the subprime crisis and some of the leading insurance companies had gone bankrupt. This weighed heavily on the committee when it unanimously concluded that foreign equity need not be raised beyond 26 per cent. This was also the BJP line until it came back to power in 2014.

GST

Now that it has finally been passed into law, I must mention that there have always been many misconceptions about the Goods and Services Tax (GST), including the BJP's stand on it and the role of the Standing Committee on Finance. These need to be clarified.

Finance minister Pranab Mukherjee introduced the constitutional amendment bill in Lok Sabha only in March 2011 when the UPA was already mid-way through its second term. Mukherjee had personally told me that he would readily accept the amendments suggested by the standing committee. However, he soon became a candidate for the Indian presidency and resigned as finance minister. For many months, the ministry was headed by the prime minister until the return of Chidambaram. Very little moved in the ministry during those months.

Despite the pressure of work on the Committee, we were keen to submit our report on the GST bill in the Monsoon Session of Parliament in 2012. However, it was due to delay on the part of the government that the report of the committee was held up for almost a year and was submitted to Parliament only in August 2013. The committee is often blamed by some leaders of the Congress party for delaying its report on the GST bill. As its chairman, I completely reject this charge. Perhaps the Congress party was only interested in blaming the BJP for the delay rather than getting the bill passed.

The BJP was in favour of the GST bill, but its leadership showed no interest in its progress during the tenure of the 15th Lok Sabha. The BJP government in Madhya Pradesh was opposed to the bill, in principle. The government of Gujarat was also opposed to its various provisions. When its representatives appeared before the committee, they presented an alternate framework to the GST and were so convincing in their arguments that most members of the committee veered around to their point of view.

Vijay Kelkar, the former finance secretary and chairman of the 14th Finance Commission that had recommended the introduction of the GST, had already appeared before the committee once. I requested him to do so a second time, so that the committee could hear his counter arguments to the MP and Gujarat governments' contentions. Vijay re-appeared before the committee and gave another masterful presentation before it, in favour of GST. This helped me immensely in finalising our report in favour of it.

There were a lot of political shenanigans by both the Congress and the BJP during the passage of the GST bill. There is no doubt that despite the commitment of the BJP's central leadership to support GST, its state governments, especially of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, were opposed to it—the first tooth and nail and the latter more subtly. However, the central leadership remained supremely indifferent. On the other hand, the Congress party was also indifferent to its passage when in

government but played hard to get when in Opposition.

Both parties did what political parties in India are best at: pushing a proposal when in power and opposing it when out of it. I had once quipped, when I was finance minister, that the Congress party and the BJP had serious difference of opinion regarding economic reforms. If the BJP announced a reform measure in the evening, the Congress party would oppose it if only on the ground that it should have been announced in the morning. The same is true of the BJP as well.

The GST is a good piece of legislation. I am glad the constitutional amendment bill has been passed by the Parliament and GST, however flawed, has become a reality. But I do not agree with those who tom-tom it as the panacea for all our economic ills. It is also doubtful whether it can immediately add a couple of percentage points to our GDP growth rate, as some people have been claiming. We should also not forget that the country had achieved, for the first time, over 8 per cent growth rate, annually, for five years running—between 2003-04 and 2007-08, without the GST.

The rest remains to be seen.

CHAPTER 37

OF FAILINGS AND FAILURES

While my experience in the Standing Committee on Finance is full of very pleasant memories, I cannot say the same for the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) or the Joint Parliamentary Committee formed to enquire into the 2G scam.

I was nominated to the PAC by the party at the beginning of my Lok Sabha term in 2009 itself. When Gopinath Munde took over as its Chairman, after the resignation of Jaswant Singh, NK Singh – who was also a member of the committee from the Rajya Sabha – and I suggested that the committee examine the issue of 2G licences to telecom companies by the UPA government. There was already a lot of talk in the media about a huge scandal in the allocation of spectrum to telecom companies. The committee accepted our suggestion and requested the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) to take up an audit of the matter.

Meanwhile, Murli Manohar Joshi had taken over as chairman of the PAC and the report of the CAG had also been received. The committee then took up the examination of the subject in right earnest and started calling witnesses to give evidence. However, later, when PMO officials and the attorney general were summoned before the PAC, the Congress party members created such a ruckus that the officials could not be examined. In the meantime, Joshi got the draft report of the committee, prepared by its secretariat, and a date was fixed to examine it.

That day will go down as one of the saddest in my long parliamentary career.

As it turned out, the lone BSP member of the committee was not present in Delhi on that day. When I called him to check, he told me that he was in Ahmedabad and would not be able to attend the meeting. In his absence, and with the chairman's casting vote, we could muster a majority. I was shocked, however, when I noticed that the member suddenly made an appearance – escorted, no less, by a Congress party member.

His surprise appearance turned the numbers against us. The Congress party members refused to allow the report to be taken up for consideration. Endless arguments ensued, and precious time was wasted. The Congress party members

were clearly indulging in filibustering. They were even standing up on their chairs and shouting at the chairman.

Joshi had no choice but to adjourn the meeting, which still did not satisfy the Congress members. One of them occupied the chairman's chair and declared that the report had been rejected by the committee. I have never seen such behaviour by MPs in any committee. Obviously, we are setting new precedents every day.

The worst part is that there is no recourse in such matters. The Speaker can also play a partisan role and refuse to act against unruly members. The committee system in Parliament adds immense value to its functioning, and its mandate should not be frittered away in this manner. The experience that I later had in the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the 2G scam further convinced me about the need for urgent reform in the committee system itself.

As is well known, when the 2G scam burst on to the political stage, all the Opposition parties demanded an enquiry into it via a JPC. The UPA government was not willing to accept the proposal and resisted it tooth and nail. An entire session of Parliament, the Winter Session of 2011, was wasted in the confrontation between the government and the Opposition. But good sense dawned on the government before the 2012 Budget Session and it agreed to the setting up of a JPC.

Its terms of reference were negotiated between the government and the Opposition. I do not know which BJP leaders in Parliament were consulted on this issue, but I was not one of them. Our leaders obviously agreed with the government's point of view that the JPC should enquire into the entirety of the telecom policy, and the grant of spectrum to the telecom companies from the time the Vajpayee government assumed office in March 1998.

It was clearly a grave error of judgement, as subsequent developments would prove. Was it a genuine mistake on the part of our negotiators with the government or was it a deliberate ploy to create trouble for those in the party who had played a role in the formulation of the telecom policy during Vajpayee's rule?

The 2G scam had taken place during the tenure of the first UPA government. It had nothing to do with the Vajpayee government. However, the enquiry by the JPC into the policies and actions of the Vajpayee government led to many undesirable consequences. Though we had nothing to hide, it gave an excuse to the Congress to object to the inclusion of Jaswant Singh and me in the JPC. An ugly scene took place in its very first meeting, where some members of the Congress party protested our presence in the committee on the grounds that, since both of us had played a key role in the formulation of the telecom policy as finance ministers, there was a conflict of interest and we should be excluded from its deliberations.

We countered their bogus arguments, and even contended that since the

committee had been appointed by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and approved by both Houses of Parliament, it was not up to the members to question its composition. The chairman of the committee, the Congress's PC Chacko, disregarded our argument and decided to make a reference to the Lok Sabha Speaker.

The Speaker, in her ruling, dismissed the plea and clearly stated that there was no conflict of interest as far as Singh and I were concerned. So, though we continued as members of the committee, the atmosphere was completely vitiated from the very first day itself. Chacko behaved in a completely partisan manner throughout the life of the committee and in all its meetings. With the support of other UPA members, he made sure that critical witnesses were not examined by the committee.

A disproportionate amount of time was spent on examining irrelevant issues relating to the Vajpayee era. Witnesses from that time who deposed before the committee were insulted and humiliated by the ruling coalition members, even as witnesses from the UPA period were fully protected. Chacko was even reluctant to call for the relevant records from the UPA's tenure, and it was a constant struggle for us to get hold of those documents. He was determined, from the very beginning, to ensure that the JPC failed in its main task of unravelling the truth and fixing responsibility for the lapses under the UPA.

The grave error of judgement on our part, in accepting the terms of reference of the JPC as suggested by the government, became more and more apparent as we proceeded with our work. Perhaps the BJP's leaders were not really interested in defending the decisions of the Vajpayee government and did not really care about adverse comments by the JPC, if any.

There were six members of the BJP in the committee, two from Rajya Sabha and four from Lok Sabha. In a meeting with Advani soon after the committee was formed, Jaswant Singh had suggested to Advani that I be informally appointed as the convener of the BJP group in the JPC. Advani accepted the suggestion readily and I assumed this responsibility. Among other things, I had to ensure that our members were present in strength, at least during the more important meetings of the committee; that we coordinated our approach on key issues and articulated our stand strongly; that such coordination was also established with like-minded parties and groups; and that we played our part as effectively as possible.

The committee itself turned out to be a farce. We called its majority report a 'fraud on Parliament'. I worked hard on our own separate report that was, after the approval of our members, appended to the main one as a note of dissent.

I had worked earlier as a member of the JPC appointed to enquire into the stock market scam of 1992. That committee was also headed by a Congressman, Ram Niwas Mirdha, a gentleman to the core. He had conducted the meetings of the committee with great dignity, grace and fairness. We belonged to the Opposition but never for a moment did he make us feel like outcastes, as Chacko did.

He also requested some of us to prepare the drafts of a few specific chapters of the report, for which we might have done more homework than the other members. He encouraged us to meet informally, sort out the contentious issues and hammer out a consensus, so that angry and ugly scenes were avoided in the formal meetings of the committee. Working under his chairmanship was a pleasure; working under the chairmanship of Chacko was a torture I would not like to go through ever again.

I must also record my great disappointment with the BJP parliamentary party leadership, as far as the 2G scam was concerned. Pramod Mahajan was already dead. No one appeared keen to defend the other telecom minister of Vajpayee—Arun Shourie. Even blatant attempts on the part of the Congress members of the committee and its chairman to drag Vajpayee's name into the proceedings did not elicit the kind of fierce reaction from the party as should have been expected. We played our role in the Committee, effectively no doubt, and vehemently opposed such moves, of course.

The Congress members did their best to scuttle the 2G report, both in the PAC as well as the JPC. But that did not prevent the truth from coming out in the public domain. It is another matter that, for reasons best known to the prosecutors of the cases, they have dodged judicial scrutiny in the trial courts and all the accused have been acquitted.

Another committee I was a part of was one that I had opted for. I joined the Consultative Committee on Coal, because a significant part of my constituency was covered by coal mines. The coal minister of the UPA government, Shriprakash Jaiswal, showed me a lot of respect, as did the officers of Coal India Limited and the ministry, but my suggestions were not always acted upon. In any case, the consultative committees of Parliament meet only once in three months and are more a formality than a part of the policy formulation or implementation machinery. The point I am making is that I took committee work in Parliament seriously and it used to keep me very busy.

I was part of the core group of the parliamentary party of the BJP that met every

morning in Advani's room, during Parliament sessions, to take stock of the situation and formulate our strategy for each day. We deliberated options for disrupting proceedings for the day or allowing Parliament to function normally; the extent of cooperation with the government in disposing of its business in Parliament; prioritisation of discussions; and the line to be taken on critical issues. All these formed the agenda of our discussions in these core group meetings.

I must confess to always being a hawk.

My line of argument was that we could not allow the government of the day to selectively choose the issues on which it sought our cooperation, while completely disregarding our views on others for which it could depend on its brute majority. Cooperation between the government and the Opposition is an attitude of mind and should cover all issues—the government's as well as the Opposition's. There must be a spirit of give and take, with the government listening to the Opposition on some issues of importance and vice versa.

These issues must be decided through mutual consultation and not unilaterally by the government. Even in the weekly meetings of the entire parliamentary party of both Houses, I often played the hawk. My point of view was mostly supported by the thumping of desks by the MPs, even as some of my senior colleagues would be unhappy at the line I would take on certain issues.

As far as debates in the Lok Sabha were concerned, my inclination was to generally speak on matters relating either to the economy or foreign policy. I rarely insisted on speaking on other issues. Jaswant Singh and Murli Manohar Joshi had similar interests and I often had to cede ground to them. As a result, I missed participating in some important debates, including those on the annual budget. Generally, even senior members like me would get the opportunity to participate in only one important debate during a session of Parliament. Sometimes it was more than once but this was rare. I also used to raise issues relating to Jharkhand and ask supplementary questions during Question Hour. I can say, with pride and without fear of contradiction, that I was an active and regular Member of Parliament in all the years that I spent there.

Besides being present in Parliament, I took my parliamentary and ministerial duties seriously and had a lot of respect for parliamentary practices, norms and conventions. One rule that I followed meticulously as a minister was about making policy statements in Parliament alone, and not outside of it, if Parliament was in session. The other convention I followed was never to talk about internal politics on foreign soil. If Britain can run only on conventions and based on an unwritten Constitution, we should at least show respect for the healthy conventions that have been established over a period of time by our predecessors. I am sorry to note that scant respect is being paid to them even by the high and mighty these days.

This does not augur well for the future of our democracy.

PART VIII

POSTSCRIPT

CHAPTER 38

LETTING GO

As the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 approached, I realised that I was largely losing interest, both in the day-to-day work of the constituency and in the proceedings of Parliament. I simply did not enjoy it any more. Rumour was also rife that in the next BJP government, if one was formed after the elections, those above the age of 75 years would be completely side-lined and not given ministerial positions. In any case, I had no wish to become a minister again and had already emerged as a dissenter within the party.

My statement against Advani in the Jinnah case and, more particularly, my letter to the party president Rajnath Singh after the loss in the 2009 elections – in which I had asked for a review of our electoral performance – firmly put me in the category of dissenters. My removal from the post of party spokesperson and my ambivalence regarding Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate of the party, added further grist to the mill. As a result, my role in the party kept diminishing by the day.

Nitin Gadkari had taken over as the party president after Rajnath Singh in December 2009. I did not know him at all as he had never worked at the central level. While he did not give me any party post, he made me the 'prabhari' (in-charge) of Punjab. I did take charge of the responsibility but, since I did not like what I saw in Punjab, I decided to give this up after a few months.

In January 2013, Gadkari's re-election as party president seemed to be a foregone conclusion. However, some allegations of wrongdoing had been levelled against the company that he had set up—the Purti Group. I felt that in view of the allegations, he should not seek re-election to the post. Jaswant Singh and a few others agreed with me. Mahesh Jethmalani, Ram Jethmalani's son and an eminent lawyer in his own right, not only felt the same way but also suggested that I should file my nomination to contest against Nitin Gadkari, if it came to that.

I seriously considered Mahesh's suggestion and, though I did not decide immediately, I thought I'd call for the nomination papers after a few days. Thawar

Chand Gehlot, a general secretary of the party, had been appointed as the returning officer for the election. I wrote a letter to him, asking for the nomination forms and sent my PS, Gajender Sharma, to hand deliver the letter and collect the forms.

As soon as he did, the news spread like wild fire that I had asked for the nomination papers and was likely to contest against Nitin Gadkari. It was an unprecedented situation for the party: never had there been any contest for the post of the national president of the party. I sat tight as the news spread. No senior leader of the party spoke to me on the issue. They were perhaps aware that I was, in some matters, a stubborn kind of fellow and would not be dissuaded easily if my mind was made up. Later in the day, I learnt that it had been decided that Gadkari would not contest and that Rajnath Singh would become the party president instead. I had no objection to that.

My declining role in party affairs at the central level naturally had an impact on my standing in the party in Jharkhand. I feel that there are a few traits in my character that make me rather unfit for the present day and age. I remember mentioning this to Advani in a heart-to-heart talk with him after the Jinnah episode.

I told him, 'When I feel that someone, however close or friendly to me earlier, now wishes to maintain a distance from me for whatever reason, right or wrong, I start drifting away from that person myself, so that he is not embarrassed. I would never like to give the impression that I am a burden he has to carry willy-nilly.' At every stage of my life, I have drifted away from the people closest to me because I thought that they no longer wanted to be close to me.

Another trait of my character has also been equally damaging to me. I hate *chaploosi* (flattery) and while I am prepared to praise people for their work or achievements, I can never become a *chaploos* (flatterer). People who look for *chaploosi* from me are always disappointed because of my reluctance to indulge in this widely-prevalent habit. I also believe in working hard and giving my best to the task at hand. I believe in letting my work speak for me instead of going out there and seeking publicity for it. This has often caused avoidable damage to my career.

In this publicity-seeking age of self-promotion, of alternate facts and post-truths, of trolls and managed social media, or even media in general, and 'supari journalism' (where a 'supari' or contract is given and taken to denigrate someone), I now realise that this attitude comes with a huge disadvantage. I have often lost out in life because I did not advertise or 'market' my achievements. What is even worse is that, over the years, others have often claimed credit for the work I have done. Often, I have been forced to merely look on as a bystander, because I consider it beneath my dignity to compete for cheap publicity.

So, my decision not to contest the Lok Sabha election of 2014 was based on this

understanding of the end of the road for me.

I also felt that I had, so far, lived my life according to the Hindu *varnashrama dharma*—the four stages or *ashramas* in human life—without really planning it that way. I spent the first quarter of my life in the *brahmacharya ashrama*: studying and acquiring knowledge. The second quarter, in the *grihastha ashrama*: I got married, started a family, nurtured and cared for it and made sure that my children were well-educated, strong in moral values and well-settled in life.

I have never imposed my will on any of my children and they have done pretty much what they wanted to do with their careers. Of course, I have been around to advise them whenever my advice was needed. But I must confess that my contribution to their upbringing has been far less than their mother's. My untenable excuse has always been that I was very busy.

Fortunately, by this time, my sons were both well settled in their careers. Both had returned home after long years abroad in lucrative jobs, and were also doing well in India. Jayant had joined the Omidyar Group and Sumant, after working in various companies as CEO and CFO, had started his own venture in the new and upcoming field of renewable energy. My daughter, who had been in China where her husband served as the Indian ambassador, had also returned to India after his retirement. As a consultant with the CII, and working from wherever her husband was posted, she was now free and ready to continue at her post, working from the CII office.

At the age of forty-nine, I had decided to give up my career in the IAS and enter the highly unpredictable and risky field of politics. Perhaps, my own form of *vanaprastha ashrama*! Politics is a jungle, after all, with all kinds of wild and dangerous animals.

That was in 1984. By 2014, I had already spent over a quarter of my life in politics. It was time to call it a day and move on from *vanaprastha* to *sanyas*. I had been lucky enough to have a more varied and richer career than most people aspire for—travelling and meeting people from all around the globe, often as an equal—and had been a part of not just administering India, but also playing a key role in policymaking at the highest of levels.

It has been my honour to serve as a parliamentarian, and to have been put there as a representative of a state where I was born and one I later adopted as home.

So, when the 2014 elections rolled around, it was Jayant who was willing to switch careers this time, like I had done, and contest for the Lok Sabha from Hazaribagh. I mentioned this to a few people in the party, including party president Rajnath Singh, prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi and, the man for all seasons, Arun Jaitley. After all, I was not sure whether they would consider Jayant's candidature seriously. I was in Delhi, as was Jayant, on the day the

Central Election Committee of the party was considering the Jharkhand list. I must admit that I never really bothered to check up on what really transpired in that meeting but, at the end of it, I got a call from Rajnath Singh doing a final check on whether I would contest the elections or not.

Once again, I told him clearly that I was not willing to contest and would be happy if the nomination was given to Jayant. A few minutes later, I got a call from his private secretary enquiring about the way Jayant spelled his name. Very soon after that, TV news channels started breaking the news that the Hazaribagh seat nomination had gone to my son Jayant Sinha. I felt relieved to receive this news.

Rajnath Singh, in his telephonic conversation with me, had made a rather unusual request. He was aware of my close relationship with Shatrughan Sinha and wanted me to use my influence to persuade him not to contest for the Lok Sabha from Patna. He would either be given another constituency or brought into the Rajya Sabha. This game had gone on for some time, as Ravi Shankar Prasad and RK Sinha (both members of Rajya Sabha) were keen to contest the Patna Lok Sabha seat. Within the party, the clout of both had increased by leaps and bounds over the past few years and many powerful leaders of the party were keen for one of them to contest from Patna.

On the other hand, close friends like me had strongly advised Shatrughan not to leave Patna and insist on contesting from his old constituency. In the meantime, a rumour had also been spread that he had neglected the constituency and was, thus, likely to lose. Some 'managed', confidential surveys done by the party had confirmed this impression as well.

The moment the Hazaribagh issue was settled in Jayant's favour, I drove to Shatrughan's place. I told him of my conversation with Rajnath Singh and repeated my earlier advice to him not to budge. He was equally determined. The matter was finally settled in his favour and he won the Patna Sahib Lok Sabha seat with a record margin of votes once again. So much for the surveys that had been carried out on behalf of the party!

The news that Jayant, and not I, was contesting from Hazaribagh had spread like wildfire within the constituency. I got numerous calls, some even insisting that I should contest one last time, while others welcomed the change on the grounds that my wish had prevailed. Jayant, Nilima and I left for Hazaribagh after a couple of days.

Not everyone in the party in Hazaribagh was thrilled with my decision. A senior worker of the party from Hazaribagh, who happened to be in Delhi, came to me with a placard that said, '*Abki bari* Yashwant Sinha, *agli bari* Jayant Sinha.' I explained the circumstances in which I was not contesting, and Jayant was, but he was not convinced. I had to face more protests when we reached Hazaribagh.

As it was Holi time, a *Holi milan samaroh* had been arranged by some senior party workers. As we prepared to leave for the Holi function, I was told that some party workers were sitting on *dharna* in front of our place, protesting the fact that I was not contesting. They refused to come inside the premises and insisted that I go out and meet them. When I went out, I noticed that they had come fully prepared with TV cameras in tow.

It was clearly a stage-managed show meant to queer the pitch for Jayant. I did not like it at all and talked to this small number of protestors sternly. I told them that they could not force me to contest if I was not willing to, and that they should respect the party's decision and devote their energy to Jayant's and the party's victory in the polls instead. I asked them to lift their *dharna* immediately and join us in the Holi celebrations. They did as asked; lifted the dharna and left.

It was a minor and insignificant event, but the media blew it out of proportion. Some TV channels even showed the clips on a loop, repeating the theme that Jayant was not welcome in Hazaribagh and that the party workers were against him. I had to spend the next few days moving from block to block in the constituency, meeting party workers and explaining why I had opted out of the race and why Jayant was contesting instead.

The matter was finally settled only when Venkaiah Naidu came to Hazaribagh to address a huge rally of party workers, which had been organised on the day Jayant was going to file his nomination papers. In his speech, Venkaiah talked in detail about Jayant's qualifications and experience and explained why the party had made him the candidate from Hazaribagh. After the rally, all of us wholeheartedly plunged into campaigning. I made sure that Jayant and I had separate programmes so that we could cover maximum ground. I also managed various aspects of the campaign for him, leaving him free to campaign out in the field.

At our request Narendra Modi found the time to come to Hazaribagh and address a mammoth meeting, two days before the election. It was the hammer blow we wanted to inflict on our opponents, without leaving time for them to repair the damage done. Modi's meeting and his speech turned the wave completely in our favour. Jayant won by a margin of 1,59,128 votes, getting a total of 4,06,931 in his favour. He had secured the largest number of votes ever by any candidate in the history of Hazaribagh. Ironically enough, he also broke the record of the largest-ever margin of victory that I had established in 1999. His nearest rival this time was Saurabh Narayan Singh of the Congress party who was contesting the election once again.

With me opting out of the electoral race and Jayant winning the election, another important chapter of my life had come to an end.

Moving in and moving on

In July 2014, I shifted to my house in Noida after vacating my official Kushak Road bungalow. I was lucky I had this house, otherwise I would not have had a place to stay in Delhi or close to it. How I came to build a house in Noida is an interesting tale worth telling. When I was in the Ministry of Industry between 1975 and 1977, an IAS officer of the 1959 batch from the UP cadre, Narendra Chaudhary, was a colleague of mine. We had become good friends and had both returned to our cadres after finishing our tenures in the ministry.

I came back to Delhi in the Ministry of Shipping and Transport in 1980, while Narendra stayed on in UP. Sometime in 1982, he suddenly appeared in my office, out of the blue, informing me that he was the CEO of the Noida Development Authority and had come to make me an offer. He was developing a prestigious sector in Noida, Sector 15-A, and wanted me to buy a piece of land in the same.

The total price of a 400 square metre plot in the sector was around ₹80,000 at that time, to be paid in five instalments. Narendra also told me that, perhaps not now, but years later, I would appreciate his offer and be grateful to him. I thanked him and promised to consider it seriously.

I did think about it over the next few days, basically to decide how I would be able to arrange for the first instalment of around ₹ 18,000 to buy the land. I soon hit upon an idea—to sell my Fiat car and buy a second-hand Ambassador. In the process, I would be able to save some money and have enough to pay the first instalment. The Fiat was quickly sold, and the Ambassador bought. With the extra money in my bank account I decided to visit Narendra in his Noida office. He had already made all the arrangements. The purchase of the plot was completed in no time, while I enjoyed a cup of coffee with him. This is how I came to acquire a plot in Noida, little expecting that I would live there one day.

I shall remain eternally grateful to Narendra for this favour because Sector 15-A in Noida is one of the best residential colonies in the National Capital Region today and even foreign visitors who have visited me here have been impressed by the way the sector has been maintained. My wife and I are quite comfortable living here and do not miss Lutyen's Delhi at all where she had spent almost all her life, and I, a considerable part of it.

It is our home now.

CHAPTER 39

MY JAIL YATRAS

My style of politics has been agitational, among other things. It is not that I jump into an agitation unthinkingly, but I do not shy away from an agitation if all reasonable channels of redress have been exhausted and I am left with no recourse. So, many of these agitations have resulted in my going to prison. For example, after my humiliating defeat in the 1984 Lok Sabha election from Hazaribagh, I had been looking for causes I could take up, to relate to the people of my constituency.

A long-standing demand of the people of Hazaribagh, since Independence, had been for a rail connection. Hazaribagh was an important district town and was subsequently elevated as the divisional headquarters of the North Chotanagpur division. But it was not yet connected by rail, which remained an unfulfilled dream for its people. I was told that anyone who would bring the much-craved railway line to its doorstep would be considered a great son of Hazaribagh. I decided to take up this cause, but it was easier said than done.

I knew that petitioning in this case would not work, as it had not done so over the years. The only way in which the issue would attract some attention was to launch an agitation for it. So, I first organised a group of my party workers in the Janata Party in 1985 or 1986 (I have forgotten the exact year) to disrupt traffic near Hazaribagh's St. Columba's College on NH-33 to press for our demand. A few of us assembled at the appointed place and decided to sit on the road with our party flags to stop traffic from both sides. It is a busy highway and many vehicles soon came to a grinding hall on both sides of the highway. As expected, the police arrived on the scene and, being a few in number, we were hardly able to offer any resistance to them.

Yet when they came to apprehend us and to clear the road, we resisted as much as we could but were bodily lifted by the police and taken away in their vehicles. We were then produced before a magistrate who decided to send us to jail. This is how we found ourselves in the Central Jail of Hazaribagh, our purpose achieved. This was to be my first jail yatra among many to come later.

The Hazaribagh Central Jail is a historical place. It is here that famous freedom fighters like the former president of India Rajendra Prasad, the poet Nirala, Frontier Gandhi Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and many other famous leaders had been incarcerated during the freedom struggle. It is a much-celebrated jail not only because Jai Prakash Narain was also a prisoner here, but also because on Diwali day, on 9 November 1942, he had escaped by scaling the outer perimeter wall of the jail along with five other friends. The cell in which he stayed is now a memorial dedicated to him.

We were housed in the same enclosure, in a ward meant for political prisoners. This was close to the room where JP was kept in 1942. Though we were in a separate enclosure from the other prisoners, we still had to face the usual hardships associated with jail life. We slept on the floor, had to use a few common toilets, draw water from the well for our bath and eat prison food. At an appointed hour at the end of the day, we were counted and locked up in our ward by the jail staff, also like the other prisoners.

Fortunately, the ordeal lasted only a few days and we were soon released.

My second jail yatra took place a few years later when we launched another agitation. I forget what the cause of the agitation was, but I remember going to jail with many of my party workers. One of them was Shaligram Singh, not only a freedom fighter and a former MLA but, more importantly, famous and distinguished as one of the six prisoners who had escaped from the same jail with JP in 1942. He had got very attached to me when I had started my political career in Hazaribagh and, despite his advanced age, had offered to court arrest with the rest of us during this agitation.

This time, too, we were lodged in the same ward as before. There was no knowing how long we would have to stay there. Unlike the last time, some of us were not given Class I prisoner status, as per the jail manual, and all of us were treated as ordinary prisoners. The food was terrible. Breakfast consisted of gram and *gur* (jaggery). The gram was of very poor quality and terribly smelly.

More than the food, it was the injustice of the treatment meted out to us that angered me and prompted me to discuss the issue rather seriously with my co-prisoners. We had a meeting where I told them that not granting Class I prisoner status to Shaligram Singh, a freedom fighter and former MLA, was a grave injustice that should not be tolerated.

We all agreed to launch an agitation against this. I offered to go on an indefinite hunger strike and several friends decided to give me company. After announcing our intent to the jail authorities, we began our fast. Our other friends who were not fasting, also decided not to cooperate with the jail authorities, thus creating a serious situation within the prison.

On the second day, we decided to keep the jail staff out by closing the gate of our enclosure, thus preventing the prison authorities from counting the number of prisoners in the ward, as was mandatory. By evening, the situation became so untenable that the jail authorities had to sound the *pagli ghanti* (crazy bell), which is a special siren that is sounded only when there is an emergency in the jail. It permits the jail authorities to use force to discipline the prisoners. As soon as the *pagli ghanti* was sounded, a posse of jail wardens forcibly entered our enclosure and threatened to beat us up with *lathis* if we did not get back to our ward and permit them to count us. We had no choice but to surrender to their demand.

On the third day, one of our fellow prisoners, Gopal Prasad, a senior lawyer, became ill and started vomiting. He had to be hospitalised. Some others also were not feeling too well. The situation was getting out of control for the jail authorities and they were finally forced to obtain the necessary orders and declare all of us as Class I prisoners. *Khichdi* was cooked and, having scored a victory, we all ate it to break our fast. At the same time, and quite cleverly, the administration also decided to release us the same evening.

My third jail yatra was even more interesting. I was already a member of the Rajya Sabha by then and had gone to Chandigarh to help my friend Harmohan Dhawan in an agitation he had launched there. It was a *jail bharo* (fill the jails) agitation in which a certain number of workers courted arrest every day. Harmohan had already gone to jail on the first day and had requested me to come to Chandigarh and lead the agitation on the last day.

I went there as planned and led a large group of party workers who had assembled to participate in the agitation. The police arrested us and took us to the local police station, where we were kept for many hours without any food or water. I told them that I was an MP and that they would have to inform the Rajya Sabha chairman about my arrest, but they remained indifferent.

We were looking forward to being taken to the Chandigarh jail and meeting our friends there, including Harmohan Dhawan, but late in the evening, when it had

already become dark, we were informed that there was no room for us in the Chandigarh jail as it was already overcrowded. Thus, we would have to be taken to Patiala and imprisoned there. Militancy in Punjab was at its peak and traveling by road at night was not safe, especially in a police vehicle, yet we were bundled into a couple of buses and duly transported to Patiala.

We arrived there late in the evening and were incarcerated. I was kept in a separate cell and later learnt that it was the same cell in which Chandra Shekhar had been kept while he was imprisoned for nineteen months during the Emergency. I wore the experience as a badge of honour.

We stayed in the Patiala jail for a few days. It was only when my colleagues in the Rajya Sabha, cutting across party lines, protested vehemently at the treatment meted out to me, and against the flimsy grounds on which we had been jailed, that the then home minister of India, Buta Singh, specially ordered our release. After my release, I was taken to Chandigarh in a car, and not in a bus as earlier, and arrived in Chandigarh to a hero's welcome by my friend Harmohan Dhawan who had been released earlier in the day.

Patiala jail was a very interesting experience because I noticed that, in Punjab, our friends were more generous towards us and regularly brought us gifts of fruits and sweets. In fact, we collected so much of these that on leaving the jail we donated it all to the other prisoners. The other interesting thing I noticed was that the three or four prisoners who were deputed to serve me were all Pakistanis who had been arrested and imprisoned for life on the charges of smuggling gold. One cooked my meals, another washed my clothes, a third used to sweep the floor and make the bed, while the fourth was a handyman.

So, I must admit that I lived in great comfort in the Patiala jail, as compared to my previous jail visits.

I have already talked about my fourth jail yatra, earlier in the book, which took place when my colleagues and I were protesting the closing down of the CBEC and CBDT training institutes in Hazaribagh.

My fifth jail yatra took place in 2014 when the NDA government had already been sworn in at the Centre. Along with my party workers, I was agitating against the state electricity board officials who had not responded, for over two years, to the demand for an electricity connection to the village of Bes in the Katkamdag block of Hazaribagh district. I had personally pleaded with the authorities to

electrify the village, but my requests had fallen on deaf years. Therefore, we decided to gherao (picket) the local electricity board office and stop all work.

We were arrested in the process and kept at the local police station all through the night, before being produced in front of a magistrate the following morning. We refused to take bail and were sent to jail. This time, we stayed in the Hazaribagh Central Jail for sixteen days and were only released on the seventeenth day. Many villagers from Bes had also gone to jail with me.

The sixteen days in jail faded in comparison to the result of this agitation. The village was finally electrified, while we were still in jail. Many leaders, including LK Advani, visited me there and it was only after Advani's visit and the electrification of the village, that we agreed to get released on bail. By far, this was my longest stay in jail during my political career.

I courted arrest one more time while leading a farmers' agitation in Akola in Maharashtra in December 2016. After our arrest, we were taken to the police lines where I told the superintendent of police not to convert it into a joke by first arresting and then releasing us soon thereafter. We would not tolerate it. But that is exactly what he did. At about 10 p.m., he announced that he had released us, and we were free to leave. We decided to reply to this by sitting on *dharna* at the police lines itself. We stayed there for three days until a settlement was reached with the local collector, and only after the intervention of the chief minister of Maharashtra.

It is my firm view that spending some time in jail for a worthy cause is the best training for public life. The experience is unforgettable, you bond with your fellow workers much better than you normally would, and there is nothing like undergoing the collective hardship associated with life in jail.

I should mention here that 2002 was celebrated all over the country as the birth centenary year of JP. I used the occasion to organise a big function in Hazaribagh Central Jail from where JP had escaped in 1942. I had invited the then vice president of India, Krishna Kant, a follower of JP himself, as the chief guest for this function. It was also attended by Chandra Shekhar, the then Jharkhand CM Babulal Marandi, Dayanand Sahay, also an MP and Digvijay Singh of Banka who was a minister in the central government at the time, as well as many others. It was renamed as the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Central Jail on that day. Various other schemes were announced as well, but they have remained largely unimplemented.

In 2014, I had even written to finance minister Arun Jaitley to declare Hazaribagh Central Jail as a national heritage monument and allot some money for this purpose. The political ward of the jail, in which many freedom fighters had stayed over the years, as well as JP's cell, are all in a state of disrepair. There is enough land within the jail to build separate, modern premises and use the old jail

as a national monument. Unfortunately, I am yet to receive a response from our finance minister.

The proposal is worth pursuing.

CHAPTER 40

MUSINGS

Bureaucracy and Politics

Since I have traversed the world of both bureaucracy and politics, people have often asked me about the relationship between the two. There is no doubt that it is one of the most difficult relationships in our democracy. The bureaucracy was supreme during the pre-Independence period. The Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers ruled the roost in the field as well as the secretariat, in policy formulation as well as its implementation. They were no doubt sensitive to people's needs and were required to be in direct touch with them, especially during field postings.

Winter was generally the time when field officers used to undertake extensive tours in their *ilaaka* (area) and meet the people in the villages. These tours used to last for days on end. The collectors often knew the important people in the villages by name. My father-in-law, an ICS officer, had also told me about the tours they did—visiting remote areas on horseback, pitching tents there for days and interacting with the locals, listening to their problems and often providing on-the-spot justice.

When I was deputy commissioner of the Santhal Parganas in Bihar (now in Jharkhand), I came across a book written by one of my British predecessors in which he had described these winter tours and how he met people in villages, addressing many of them by their first names.

All this has completely changed now and, with modern means of communication and the reduced size of districts, the need for the collector to undertake such tours and spend a certain number of nights outside the headquarters has also diminished. The introduction of democracy at various levels and the plethora of elected representatives at these levels, as well as the proliferation of political parties, has dramatically changed the relationship between the

bureaucracy and politicians.

A long time ago, somebody had described this co-existence as two swords in one scabbard. Since their jurisdictions are often not clearly defined, competition, leading to a clash, becomes inevitable. In this struggle, the bureaucrat is often left to fend for himself, his service colleagues being reluctant to come forward to help him. Compromises become the order of the day and, with the passage of time, exceptions to this are becoming increasingly rare.

I understand that, immediately after Independence, most political bosses dealt with the bureaucracy with sensitivity and without rancour, despite having suffered at their hands earlier. However, with the decline in political standards and moral values, the tendency on the part of the politician, whether in power or not, to pressurise the bureaucracy to do things that are not entirely in order and often wrong (or even illegal), is becoming increasingly common. With an increase in such clashes, some civil servants have even ended up paying the price for it while others have had to make compromises to survive and prosper.

Like any other professional, a civil servant naturally likes to progress in service. S/he likes to reach the top and good postings, therefore, become extremely important. If a civil servant has held important posts and gathered useful experience, the chances are that he or she would go further in his or her career and even reach the top. On the other hand, if s/he is condemned from one bad posting to another, the chances are that s/he would be left behind. Very few civil servants have prospered after suffering a series of unimportant postings. Every civil servant, therefore, tries to get a 'good' posting. This then becomes the starting point of compromise.

From my own experience, I would regard 1967 as a watershed moment in the history of the decline of the civil service in India. It was in this year that coalition governments, consisting of disparate political elements, were formed in many North Indian states including Bihar. The ministers in these governments had obviously been at the receiving end of the bureaucracy during the earlier Congress regimes. They also had none of the generosity of the immediate post-Independence administrators to forget, forgive and move on. So, as my own experience has shown, they came determined to settle scores with the bureaucracy. This had a dreadful impact on its morale. Most bureaucrats caved under pressure and put up with the insults and humiliations heaped upon them. Some, like me, resisted and paid the price for it.

Another watershed moment came during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. During this period, the principle of the bureaucracy's loyalty to the Constitution and the rule of law was replaced by loyalty to a family and an individual within that family. It was no longer enough to be loyal to the ruling

party alone. What was demanded was loyalty to a single individual and a single family. Those who were unwilling do so were condemned to insignificance and those who had no such compunction prospered. Here again, I remember how Nilima's father, who was the topper of his batch in the ICS, was denied a promotion by the then PM Indira Gandhi as he was not considered to be 'committed' in the manner she demanded.

The Emergency did incalculable damage to the role, standards, norms, discipline and morale of the civil service. After that it has been downhill all the way.

One pernicious side effect of the politicisation of the bureaucracy has been its impact on the fairness of elections. There is no doubt that the Election Commission has brought about a sea change in the way elections are now conducted in India, but the scope for mischief remains and the attitude of the bureaucracy, especially a law enforcement agency like the police, can significantly influence the outcome. I have mentioned many such examples in this book. The Election Commission must strengthen the role of its observers further to ensure that 'committed' officers do not spoil the integrity of free and fair elections. My experience shows that these observers do not 'observe' as well as they should.

When I joined the IAS, we were taught that a civil servant must be anonymous. We were told never to go out and seek personal publicity. All that has completely changed now. Imagine the publicity that would have been given to my altercation with the CM of Bihar, when I was the deputy commissioner in Dumka, and my subsequent and sudden transfer from there. In those days, it merited nothing more than a small and casual mention of a few lines in one or two newspapers.

Similarly, when I left the bureaucracy in 1984 to contest elections, it received very little attention in the media. Today, even a junior bureaucrat leaving his job to join politics is considered a big event. The ubiquitous media, and the penchant on the part of many in the bureaucracy to seek personal publicity, has completely changed the rules of the game.

Though the license-permit-quota raj stands largely abolished, due to the liberalisation of the economy, the interface between the corporates and the bureaucracy remains a cause for concern. I was brought up on the theory that business was generally unclean and therefore businessmen had to be avoided. When I was deputy commissioner in Dumka, a state government minister had come to visit the place. He was obviously on cordial terms with a leading local businessman. The businessman invited him for tea at his place and was very keen for me to attend as well. He repeated this request many times but, on each occasion, I expressed my inability to accept his invitation. The minister, of course, went to his place without me. How many civil servants would be so strict now?

I had a massive shock awaiting me, therefore, when I was transferred to the Ministry of Commerce after Dumka. In the ministry, one had to deal with export promotion, which meant promoting the export business of specific business houses and people. Working closely with them was more often the norm rather than the exception. The height of this was during my tenure in Germany. I remember the many occasions where I not only accompanied the exporters from India for their business meetings with importers in Germany, but also personally carried their suitcases of samples. All this, of course, was to help the national cause of export promotion and it was entirely impersonal.

However, the dividing line between personal and official is very thin and can be obliterated easily. This is where you must be extremely cautious. The temptation to cross the line can be compelling. Again, this is where a person in power – whether a civil servant or a minister – must show the sterner stuff s/he is made of. The pitfalls are many; most people around you want you to succumb to these temptations. Therefore, it becomes a full-time job to maintain your integrity under such trying circumstances.

Another popular question I am often asked about is related to my experience in dealing with the bureaucracy as a politician. It is not a happy one. After losing my Lok Sabha election from Hazaribagh in 1984, I decided to undertake *padyatras* in the various parts of the constituency to acquaint myself with the problems of the people and do my bit in resolving them. I visited block offices on foot, met with block development officers and others to plead with them to solve the problems of people at the local level.

In these meetings, even the BDO would behave like a big shot and show very little courtesy to me. The deputy commissioner generally considered it beneath his dignity to waste his time with a person like me. In one such meeting, the deputy commissioner of Hazaribagh asked me which party I belonged to. When I mentioned the name of the Janata Party, he seemed unaware of its existence altogether. Needless to say, I failed to find any solution to the existing problems, nor did I see any effort from the bureaucracy to resolve them.

My experience during a Lok Sabha by-election in Bihar's Banka was even more depressing. George Fernandes was our candidate in the election and I was his campaign manager. We were up against a well-connected and powerful politician of the Congress party, which was the ruling party in the state at the time. The collector of Bhagalpur, under whose jurisdiction Banka fell, had served as my nazarat branch deputy collector in Dumka. The commissioner of the division had served with me as an SDO.

Obviously, we all knew each other well. But when I used to meet them about election work, they would show absolutely no sign of recognition. At times, they

would not even offer me a chair. The superintendent of police was downright rude. It was during this time that I received the 'enlightenment' I had been waiting for ever since my argument with the CM at Dumka: if the bureaucrats show such partisan commitment to the party in power, why should they not suffer when the party in power changes, and they are at the mercy of the new rulers?

I have often felt extremely unnerved and angry at the behaviour of some officials when out of power. I'm only human. Taking revenge is a thought that has often crossed my mind. But when the time has come for me to act on that instinct, I have forgotten and forgiven. Someone had once complained to KB Lall, who was my secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, that a person Lall had helped was criticising him. Lall's reply was a gem, and one I remember to this day. 'He acted according to his character, I acted according to mine; why should I change my character to match his?' he replied. This has been the guiding principle of my life as well.

Institutions

The institutions of democracy have undergone many changes during this period. Their strengths or weaknesses have depended on the people who have manned them from time to time. But many of them have not been able to resist the onslaughts on their authority over the years and, therefore, stand weakened today.

Let us look at them one by one. Prime minister Modi had bowed down before entering Parliament and touched its steps with his forehead in obeisance to the majesty it represented. This gave hope that democracy and its institutions would be safe during his regime. In fact, the contrary has happened.

Sessions of Parliament have become shorter and shorter and are entirely dependent on the sweet will of the government of the day. Like the state governments, which, over a period of time have come to look at state legislatures as a necessary evil and confine their sessions to the minimum time needed to merely fulfill their constitutional obligations, the present government at the Centre has started doing the same. It has shown scant respect for Parliament, its traditions, conventions, practices and precedents, which have been violated with impunity.

The Winter Session of 2017 was curtailed because elections were being held in

one state, namely, Gujarat. Similar elections at the same time of the year in Jharkhand earlier merited no such treatment, showing clearly that some state elections are more important than others. It is an unhealthy precedent that should not be followed in future. Similarly, the first part of the 2018 Budget Session was kept so short that the constitutional responsibility of Parliament like debating and passing the Motion of Thanks to the President of India for his address to the joint session of the two Houses, the discussion on the general budget and the Railway Budget, which are now combined had to be done without full debate and in the shortest possible time.

The Supreme Court of India is in deep crisis. For the first time in our history, four senior-most judges of the Court went public with their grievances about how the Court was functioning. They said that Benches of the Court were 'arranged' in order to get favourable verdicts. They also warned the people that democracy in the country was in danger. The relationship between the government and the judiciary is not at its most cordial; in fact, it is under great strain.

The Election Commission is another important institution of our democracy and is among the institutions that have become stronger over the years. There is no doubt that the Commission has strengthened itself over the years and is more potent than ever before. The conduct of elections has also become freer and fairer but electoral reforms, especially the role of money power in elections, is still a major issue. So is the electronic voting machine (EVM), on the reliability of which doubts have been cast by responsible people.

However, a lot remains to be done to make them completely transparent. Neither the political class nor the administration has played its role properly in ensuring this outcome.

My first brush with general elections was in 1962 when I was posted as assistant magistrate in Arrah where I assisted my district collector in the conduct of the general elections. Later, I was fully responsible for the conduct of the general elections in 1967 as deputy commissioner of the Santhal Parganas. In those days, elections were generally free and fair. Booth capturing was more the exception than the rule, even in a state like Bihar. I remember how angry I felt when some mischief makers ran away with the ballot box from one of the booths in my district in the 1967 elections. I told Ashok Jung Bahadur, the additional SP in charge of the Sahebganj police district, to take exemplary action against the miscreants so that nobody would indulge in such a misadventure ever again.

When I went over to the other side and started contesting elections myself, I remember being left aghast at the malpractices that routinely took place during the elections of 1984 and 1991. Things started changing when TN Seshan became the Chief Election Commissioner. In the 1995 elections for the Bihar assembly, I was a

candidate from Ranchi. I was so scared of being hauled up by the authorities for wrongdoing that I went out of my way to be correct and within the law. All expenses were faithfully reflected in the account, which I later submitted to the Returning Officer.

EVMs are now being increasingly questioned. Knowledgeable people tell me that they can be electronically manipulated. Many countries have given up these machines and replaced them with ballot paper. The Election Commission, instead of patting itself on the back, should seriously consider these complaints and provide opportunities to these doubting Thomases to prove whether or not the machines can be manipulated, by honestly making its own EVM available to them.

Some actions of the Election Commission have also cast a shadow, of late, on its fairness and impartiality. The huge gap of many weeks between the state assembly elections of Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat at the end of 2017, and the recommendation to disqualify 20 MLAs of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi without giving them an opportunity to be heard, have cast serious doubts on its impartial functioning.

The use of money power in elections is a disease that has become worse with time. Electoral bonds will only ensure that while everyone else is in the dark about who has given how much donation to whom, the government would know every detail. I only hope that Aadhaar cards would not be linked to voter's identity cards ever, otherwise the secrecy of the vote would also be lost.

Media

I have dealt with the media extensively during the last three decades that I have been in public life. I have my complaints, but I am not going into them here. Why should the media, like their corporate bosses, behave like bards in the court of the rulers of the day? Media houses appear to be competing in singing the praises of people in authority, without any scrutiny whatsoever. In this digital age of twenty-four-hour news cycles, the role and responsibility of the print and visual media has increased manifold. They must only convey the truth and nothing else to their readers or viewers. History is replete with examples of how democratically-elected leaders have transformed into despots with the support of a supine party, a dysfunctional legislature and a captive media. An army of social media trolls makes it even easier. The people of India deserve better than the entertainment that often passes for news these days.

The government has acquired near-total control over the media through its owners and through friendly editors and anchors. Some of the channels even put

Doordarshan to shame when it comes to propagating the government's point of view. They are also completely oblivious of the damage they are doing to sensitive national issues like those involving Jammu and Kashmir because of their irresponsible and one-sided opinions. Some newspapers are no more than the government's mouth-piece. There is very little space for contrarian points of view. The damage that some television channels are doing to the polity today will be fully realised only later.

Investigative Agencies

The investigative agencies of the government like the CBI, Enforcement Directorate and the Income Tax department have unashamedly become tools in the hands of the government to 'fix' its political opponents. So, cases relating to persons belonging to the ruling party are glossed over or 'managed' and the adversaries are harassed endlessly. Independent institutions like the RBI have also been seriously compromised. The way the RBI surrendered to the government on the question of demonetisation is a case in point. I am fully convinced that there is an undeclared emergency prevailing in the country. The element of fear among all sections of society is far more than I had witnessed even during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi.

On Ideology: Swadeshi, RSS and the Sangh Parivar

I was never a member of the RSS. I have never, even out of curiosity, worn the khaki half pants or black cap or gone to a *shakha*. So, I cannot even lay a tenuous claim to this paternity that is the hallmark of the BJP. To curry favour with the powers that be, new entrants to the BJP often claim that they have attended the Sangh's *shakha* as a child or, if not, their father might have.

Fortunately for me, as I have mentioned elsewhere in the book, this did not cause any major problems because I largely dealt with economic and foreign policy

issues in the BJP, and not volatile, political ones like the Ram Mandir, Common Civil Code or Article 370 of the Constitution relating to Jammu and Kashmir. This was a huge relief to me because I was generally not required or expected to take positions on these issues. I have already mentioned that Vajpayee and Advani used to invite me to their meetings with top Sangh functionaries whenever discussions were held on economic issues.

I was attracted to the Swadeshi philosophy even before I joined the BJP. Thus, I had no ideological problems in working with the Swadeshi Jagran Manch on this issue, though differences cropped up between the Manch and me later, on the interpretation of this philosophy. My definition of it was simple – it is only the strong who can practice Swadeshi, not the weak. Therefore, we had to do whatever was needed to make India strong. I was never in favour of autarky. A foreign investor could take away his capital, but not his factory.

I was opposed to the Dunkel proposals when they were presented to the World Trade Organisation and even travelled on a bicycle with about 200 companions from Hazaribagh to Patna, to sensitise people about the dangers of accepting these proposals, especially relating to agriculture. I still feel that agriculture is not merely an occupation in India. It is a way of life and must be protected and preserved at all costs. However, this does not mean that reforms in agriculture should be ignored. On the other hand, modern technology and practices must be used to make it more efficient, productive, competitive and lucrative.

In the Vajpayee government, discussions with the Sangh on economic issues had become increasingly infrequent. I was very keen that such discussions take place, so that we could explain the government's policies to the Sangh. A few such meetings were indeed held but there was no meeting of minds. This led to further misunderstanding with the Sangh Parivar and I soon became a villain as far as they were concerned.

Guru dakshina (an old tradition in the Sangh, started by Guru Golwalkar) is a big annual event that is held everywhere the RSS is in existence, where they use the opportunity to collect money. Their annual collection is done on this day—the normal rule is to donate a month's salary/earnings. It was initially supposed to be *gupt daan* (undisclosed charity) in an envelope, given when you salute the flag, and is a sacred occasion for the Sangh. This is no longer the case, where peeks at the amount are often followed by the words – as they once were directed towards me in Hazaribagh – '*thoda kam tha*' (it was too little).

I always gave my guru dakshina at Hazaribagh and the RSS used to organise a special function there to suit my convenience. We would all assemble at the appointed place and time, fall in line, say our prayer and then sit down for the *bauddhik* or intellectual lecture delivered by some local Sangh functionary. To my

great amusement, the talk would often be on economic or foreign policy. The head clerk of the electricity office, for example, who could be the chosen senior functionary, would deliver a lecture on economic or foreign policy and I, as the finance or foreign minister of India would sit there and listen to it.

The philosophy these lectures espoused was familiar to me. It was all about making India great, powerful, self-reliant and a *vishwa guru*, with which I had no problem. But objectives apart, it was the strategy to achieve them with which I was not in agreement. Most of these people were prisoners of an ideology that had long become irrelevant and they would repeat the same lecture everywhere and every time. Unfortunately, it carries great conviction with the gullible, as does the complete nonsense that is dished out by the 'bhakts' on social media these days.

My problems with the Sangh Parivar increased when I became the finance minister. In fact, senior Sangh functionaries would often approach me to help someone close to them. I used to listen to them carefully, would even try to help if the work was doable but, more often than not, I had to disappoint them. This may have been one of the reasons why the gap between them and me only widened as time went by.

The rest, I suppose, was only a matter of time.

Notes on People

Two traits in people, especially in India, have always bothered me deeply. The first is the culture of *sifarish* (recommendation) and the other is the complete disregard for punctuality and the value of time, especially of another person's. The culture of *sifarish* is getting worse by the day. The conviction that anything can be done through *sifarish*, while nothing can be achieved without it, has become quite deep rooted in our society. So, if you are in a position of authority, you have to face this problem on a daily basis.

As an elected representative, if you dare tell people why their work cannot be done, they are likely to tell you rather bluntly, 'That is why we have come to you. If it could have been done through the normal channels, why would we come to you?' If you argue any further, they may even threaten to 'fix you' in the next election.

When I was the EAM, an entire family from my constituency came to visit me one day. Their son had secured admission in some nondescript US university, the name of which I had not even heard before. But the family was very excited about his achievement and admission to a US university. 'So, what is the problem?' I asked them. 'Visa. The US visa is the problem, and we have come to you to make sure that our son gets the US visa'. When I pleaded with them that the US Embassy did not listen to us or to anybody else in these matters, and took its own decision, their reply left me flabbergasted. 'All that you have to do is pick up the phone and speak to Bushwa (President Bush) and the work will be done in no time.' I only wish life was as simple as these folks imagined it to be.

Entire tomes can be written on situations like these, which I have faced in my public life. The sooner our people rid themselves of this habit, the better it will be for all of us.

I have already mentioned in this book how strict the Germans are about punctuality. Some of it has rubbed off on me. However, it is a grave error to be punctual in politics: when arriving on time, I was often told by the organisers of an event that since they had not expected me to turn up so early, much like other leaders, it would take a while to assemble a large crowd for me. And if I reached late, the organisers would tell me that a huge crowd had waited for me but had gone away because I had not come on time. You cannot win either way.

When I was in the Janata Party, George Fernandes decided to visit Hazaribagh and I had arranged some programmes for him, especially in the coal mines area. George was a famous labour leader and I had no doubt that a big crowd would assemble to hear him. When we reached the place where the meeting was supposed to be held, the organisers first took us to the guest house. There they told us that since the time given to them had not been appropriate from the point of view of the miners' schedule, they had not been able to collect a crowd. This was nothing but an excuse. While I felt let down, George took it in his stride and delivered a long speech in the drawing room of the guest house to the leaders who had assembled there.

The most disagreeable aspect of this lack of respect for time is that people often drop in without an appointment or warning to see you. They often do not mind waiting for hours to see you because they have no value or use for their own time. In my constituency, I have often noticed that people tend to hang around even after they have met me, and their work has been duly attended to.

Punctuality and the contempt for the value of time is a national failing and the sooner we rid ourselves of it, the better.

FOOTNOTE

1 Momin Khan Momin (*umr to sari kati ishq-e-butaan mein* 'Momin', *ab aakhiri waqt mein kya khaak musalamaan honge*) ishq-e-butaan = love of idols
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4 If Gulzarilal Nanda's two terms as acting PM are excluded.
5 Yashwant Sinha, *Confessions of a Swadeshi Reformer* (Penguin: New Delhi, 2007)
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EPILOGUE

My life so far has spanned eight decades. My father was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, my mother in the first decade of the twentieth. Thus, I have a direct connection with three centuries—the nineteenth, twentieth and the twenty-first. The longest part of my own life has been spent in the twentieth century. It has been a long journey, therefore, from the third decade of the last century in which I was born, to the second decade of the present century in which I am living today. It has also been a long journey for India and for the rest of the world as well.

I have already described how my childhood was spent in poverty and deprivation. I studied in Hindi-medium schools because my parents could afford no better. We never had a drawing room in our house or, for that matter, a dining room. Apart from my father's office and library, all the other rooms in the rented houses we lived in were used as bedrooms to accommodate our large family. The kitchen, which was not a separate room but the extension of a verandah, also served as the dining room. Cooking was done by my mother, helped by my sisters, on a *chulha* on the floor. We also sat on the floor for our meals.

We lacked the ordinary comforts of life. Our first radio was bought when my brother Ajit received his scholarship money and spent a part of it to acquire the device. Needless to say, it caused great happiness and joy in the family and we used to crowd around it in our spare time and listen to Hindi film music. Despite being in Class I government jobs, my elder brothers also led a spartan life because the extra money had to be sent to my parents for the upbringing of the rest of us or saved for our sisters' weddings.

My father wound up his establishment in Patna sometime in 1953 and spent the remaining part of his life, until he passed away in 1977, with one son or another. My parents preferred to live with Nilima and me, perhaps because they liked her accommodating nature. As chance would have it, my father, mother, and my eldest brother who suffered from epilepsy, all breathed their last in my house in Patna. My relatives consoled me by saying that though my father never built a house, it was God's will that he would die in one of his own. In those days, whatever belonged to the children was automatically taken to belong to the parents as well.

Thus, they lived in my house or in my elder brothers' as a matter of right and not on anyone's sufferance.

By marrying the daughter of an ICS officer, I married into high society. My marriage exposed me to a way of life I was not very familiar with, but I learnt fast and made myself comfortable in my new environment. Very few people are aware of, or remember, the kind of life that people of my generation have lived.

Fortunately, my children have inherited our family traits of courage, commitment, ethics and excellence and charted their own paths in life. My own contribution to the choices they have made in life has been limited. I have left them free to make their own decisions. Of course, I have been available for advice if they needed it, and all three of them have done well in their own way. The most important thing for Nilima and me has been the fact that they are all back in India now.

My daughter, Sharmila, is married to a former foreign service officer. Her return was expected when her husband retired and showed very little interest in serving abroad after his retirement. But it was always doubtful whether my two sons, Jayant and Sumant, who had spent long years abroad, would ever return to India. Sumant was the first to come back, and Jayant followed a few years later. Now both are well settled in India.

Our children are back, no doubt, but of our five grandchildren, three are abroad, and one will soon be on his way to the US too. Our eldest grandchild, Jayant's son, Rishabh, has just finished his MBA from Harvard Business School, like his father, and is going to work in New York with a private equity firm. Jayant's younger son, Aashir, is in the Concord Academy in Boston. Sumant's daughter, Tarushi, has joined Wellesley College, also in Boston; and Sharmila's son, Devansh, has just returned from Switzerland where he had gone for higher studies in hotel management. Even our youngest grandchild, Siddhant, Sumant's son who was in India, is going to the US for the rest of his schooling. We miss all of them immensely, because we know that while our kids have come back, their kids, in turn, may not.

I have already mentioned how and when we acquired the family's first radio. Telephone was a luxury we could not afford. I do not remember a single household of even our well-to-do relatives who had a phone in those days. I got my first home and office phone when I joined as the SDO in Giridih in 1962, when I was all of twenty-five. Apart from the phone, the only other equipment we had in the office was a typewriter, a cyclostyling machine and a telex. Compare it with all the gadgets that are available so easily these days to help us discharge our personal and official duties.

Television came much later. We got our first television set when we went to

Germany in 1971. An air conditioner was a rare luxury. Today, we cannot live without one. Air-conditioned cars were non-existent. I have already mentioned how I had to bring my parents to Patna from Hazaribagh in a jeep at the height of summer in 1974.

You had to book a trunk call to speak to someone in another place. The category of calls at the time were: ordinary, urgent, immediate and lightning. Sometimes the ordinary calls never materialised. You had to speak loudly enough to be heard, conversations to which the neighbours were often unwittingly privy. Talking to someone abroad on the phone was unheard of. I remember how excited I was when I talked to my daughter Sharmila, who was in Beijing, on a phone from Hong Kong when I was visiting the place in 1983. Even local calls had to go through a telephone exchange.

To the younger generation, which has all the modern gadgets at its command, this might sound like a story from prehistoric times, but people of my generation have lived through it.

Given the threats to the global environment and the rapidity of climate change, it is difficult to say in what form the earth will survive in the future or whether it will perish completely. While we are lucky that the earth has survived so far, future generations may not be so fortunate. Urgent action is needed on this front.

I have always followed the principle of leaving a place in a better condition than it was on my taking it over. This rule has applied to all the offices and residences which I have temporarily occupied, as well as my own properties. I have also always 'repaired' old files that were placed before me. One thing that has always baffled my family members and friends is the way I keep shifting furniture from one place to another in my house. My explanation is that, apart from making the room look better, it enables us to clear the dust that may have accumulated underneath it. My restlessness finds expression in multiple ways.

I was naturally very happy that I had finally left electoral politics and was free to lead my life as I wished. At the same time, I felt good when the prime minister invited me to a meeting to discuss the future of the Planning Commission soon after the new government was formed. I was asked to give my views in writing, which I did. It is another matter altogether that those views were completely ignored.

My next meeting with the prime minister was in connection with the

inauguration of a much-awaited railway line. The railway link up to Hazaribagh from Koderma had been completed and was ready for inauguration a few months after the Lok Sabha elections of 2014. It was a dream come true for the people of Hazaribagh and for me personally. The foundation stone of this project had been laid by prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee way back in 1999. Therefore, I was keen for the present PM to come to Hazaribagh and inaugurate the project.

I wrote a letter requesting him to do so and, subsequently, called on him to invite him personally. He agreed, came to Hazaribagh, inaugurated the railway line and addressed the massive crowd that had assembled. I was grateful to him for accepting my invitation and visiting Hazaribagh, once again.

My life was following its predictable course. I was well settled in my house in Noida's Sector 15-A; most of the travelling I did was to Hazaribagh where the BJP workers and others were not ready to let go of me yet. Occasionally, I wrote articles in newspapers and was invited to give talks at various places. Perhaps my life would have gone on like this, like that of any retired politician, but then one day I came across a very thoughtful article written by Wajahat Habibullah—a distinguished former civil servant who had headed both the Information Commission and the Minorities Commission—on the state of affairs in Jammu and Kashmir, especially after the killing of Burhan Wani in July 2016.

I telephoned Habibullah and congratulated him for writing the article. Soon thereafter, a meeting on J&K was organised by the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR) of which Habibullah is the chairperson. I attended this meeting where it was decided that given the seriousness of the situation, some of those present should visit Srinagar at the earliest. I agreed to join this group, which we called the Concerned Citizens Group. Apart from Habibullah and me, the other members were Sushobha Barve, Air Vice Marshall (retd.) Kapil Kak and senior journalist Bharat Bhushan.

Our visit to Srinagar was very successful, where all doors, considered closed earlier to visitors from India, were opened for us. We met practically every individual, organisation and association that mattered and prepared a worthwhile report. On my return, I asked for time from Home Minister Rajnath Singh, which was readily given. I informed him about the situation in J&K and requested him to give time to the Group to call on him and submit the report. He readily agreed to this suggestion as well. I also met National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

I was invited for another meeting with the home minister a few days later, where I noticed that he was now reluctant to meet the Group and receive its report. Obviously, something had happened in between my two meetings with him. The Group had no option but to release the report to the media and send copies of it to the PM and the home minister.

The Group made a second visit to Kashmir in December 2016, in which we travelled to some other places in the Valley, like Shopian, Anantnag, Budgam and Baramulla. We met with civil society groups in all these cities. I had telephoned the PMO, while still in Srinagar, for an appointment with the PM to discuss the situation in J&K. I was deeply disappointed when I realised that the prime minister had no time for me, neither then nor later. After our third visit to Srinagar, I asked for time to see the home minister. Even this opportunity was denied to me. This was very unlike Rajnath Singh, who has always been on cordial terms with me. Clearly, something had snapped between the government and me.

J&K has been an unresolved issue since 1947. It is a matter of the deepest regret that as a result of the serious but avoidable mistakes made by all governments of India over the years, a majority of people in the Valley feel alienated. It is our national duty to undo the wrongs done in the past and win the hearts and minds of our brothers and sisters in J&K. It is with this end in mind that I have involved myself with this issue.

Also, I have no doubt that the little space that was given to me by the stakeholders in the Valley was on account of the fact that I was a member of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, which had followed a policy towards J&K and Pakistan that is still admired by the people there. So far, I have not been able to figure out why the PM and the home minister decided to treat the Group and its report with such disdain.

My own marginalisation within the BJP was now complete. Not only did I have no role in the party, I had no connection with the people in the government either. I felt completely helpless when people approached me to get their genuine work done in 'our' own government and I could not help them. My efforts to reach the ministers in the government, once or twice, were met with no response. The Government of France decided to confer the title of the Officer of the Legion of Honour on me for which a function was held at the French Embassy in Delhi. Nobody from the party or government thought it fit to even send me a congratulatory message for this. My letters to the PM and other ministers went unacknowledged and unanswered.

Apart from all this, I was also becoming increasingly unhappy at the turn of events in our polity. My most important concern was the manner in which the institutions of democracy in the country were being compromised. I felt alarmed at facts being replaced by fiction in expensive government advertisements, and the futility of these bombastic claims. A day finally came when these tenuous bonds were finally severed, and I announced my resignation from the BJP. It was no longer the party that I had joined.

While announcing my resignation from the BJP in Patna on 21 April 2018, I

also said that I would continue to raise issues of national importance for as long as I lived.

Because, for me, my journey's end has no end till I finally go to sleep. Until then I'll carry on relentlessly.